Telling Stories of Pain:
Women Writing Gender, Sexuality and Violence in the Novel of the Lebanese Civil War

by

Khaled M. Al-Masri

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
(Near Eastern Studies)
in the University of Michigan
2010

Doctoral Committee:

Professor Anton Shammas, Chair
Professor Patricia Smith Yaeger
Associate Professor Kathryn Babayan
Associate Professor Carol B. Bardenstein

For my parents

Acknowledgements

This dissertation could never have been written without the help and support of many people. First and foremost, I am deeply thankful to my advisor, Professor Anton Shammas, for his thorough guidance throughout this process. This dissertation was shaped by his thoughtful comments, insightful critiques and careful readings, both formally and informally during our many conversations.

I am also very grateful to the members of my dissertation committee, who offered their help, support and understanding. I thank Professors Carol Bardenstein, Kathryn Babayan and Patricia Yaeger for taking the time to read my dissertation and aid me in the development of my ideas with their invaluable questions, suggestions and comments.

I would like to thank Professor Raji Rammuny for being a great mentor, always ready with sound advice and enthusiastic encouragement.

Many thanks go to Angela Beskow as well for her guidance, patience and logistical assistance.

I am deeply indebted to Allison Blecker for her immeasurable help throughout the writing of this dissertation. She read numerous drafts and I am enormously grateful for her endless encouragement and unflagging support.

Finally, my family holds a special place in my heart. I am eternally grateful for their unfaltering belief in me. I learned my love of stories from my late grandfather, Abu Khulqi, who helped shape my life in countless ways with his many tales.

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT

Telling Stories of Pain:
Women Writing Gender, Sexuality and Violence in the Novel of the Lebanese Civil War

by

Khaled M. Al-Masri

Chair: Anton Shammas

Lebanese Civil War narratives by women writers received considerable attention in studies by Western scholars such as Miriam Cooke and Evelyne Accad. However, through my focus on three novels in this dissertation, Hanan al-Shaykh's *The Story of Zahra* (1980), Najwa Barakat's *Ya Salaam* (1999) and Alawiyya Subuh's *Maryam of Stories* (2002), that are concerned with the pre- and post-war environments, I hope to contribute a more holistic understanding of Lebanese society as presented by women writers. I concentrate on the development of patriarchal structures of oppression as well as creative means of resistance by its victims through the study of representations of gender, sexuality and violence. *Ya Salaam* and *Maryam of Stories*, it should be noted, have not been studied, and scholarship on *The Story of Zahra* has focused on its second part, neglecting the first part that treats Zahra's psychosexual development and provides important insight into prewar Beirut. I approach the explicit discussion of sex and

violence in these novels as evidence of their focus on the body, a contested site. I also discuss their interest in the relationships between women, a link explored through the centralization of female characters in the texts. My dissertation further explores traditional patriarchal structures and patterns of gendered oppression that demonstrate remarkable temporal and spatial mobility.

I complicate my study by revealing the diversity among these three novels, evidenced by their varied treatment of gender, sexuality and violence. The *Story of Zahra* is concerned primarily with characters' negotiation of gender, and it uses these processes to explore themes of sexuality and violence. In contrast, *Ya Salaam* utilizes violence as a lens, and *Maryam of Stories* approaches gender and violence through sexuality.

Rather than employing a unifying theoretical framework in this dissertation, I link the novels thematically, utilizing psychoanalysis, and Feminist, literary and gender theory throughout, including the work of Freud, Jung, Cixous, Connell, Flax, Foucault and others.

Chapter One

Introduction

The Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) vitalized the nation's literary tradition, leading to the rise of an entire genre of Lebanese Civil War narratives. Here, women speak as loudly as men, shaping collective and individual memories of war. They imbue the fifteen years of conflict as well as their aftermath with new significance and undermine the stories that male political, military, religious and, yes, literary, voices wielded in their attempts to give chaos a meaning.

Within these narratives and in cultural imagination more generally, the body of the state has often been rendered female and the civil strife that wracks the nation maps onto the body of woman, victim and traitor, saint and whore, all in a single imagining. The writing of Lebanese women authors, however, is concerned with the bodies of real women – complex, flawed, powerful, weak, submissive and rebellious. These women represent themselves and their experiences; they often represent other women – friends, sisters, mothers, daughters, neighbors – but in these narratives, the value of their personal struggles and the suffering of their bodies are never sacrificed in service of the nation. This dissertation tells the story of these women – those who write as well as those who are written into their tales – and how their experiences are shaped by gender, sexuality and violence. These are stories of love, imagination and hope, but more often, of violence, pain, oppression and, of course, civil war. Civil war, by its nature divisive and

physically, emotionally and psychologically destructive, becomes even more so when a city turns against itself, like Beirut during the Lebanese Civil War.

In this introduction, I first introduce the three novels treated in this dissertation, their authors, some shared themes that link them and the main criteria for their selection. Then I provide a brief history of Lebanon and its civil wars so as to contextualize the Lebanese Civil War narratives treated in my dissertation. This is followed by a history of the Arabic novel in general and the Lebanese novel in particular. I focus on the development of the Lebanese Civil War narrative genre, highlighting and briefly discussing its key novels while explaining my reasons for excluding them from this dissertation.

Next, I explore the secondary literature most relevant to my topic. In the following section, I define the key terms employed in this dissertation: gender, sexuality and violence. I then turn to a discussion of the framework I have chosen to utilize, which is thematic, rather than theoretical. Finally, I provide a brief chapter outline.

Hikayat Zahra (1980, *The Story of Zahra*) by Hanan al-Shaykh[1], *Ya Salaam* (1999, *Oh, Peace*) by Najwa Barakat[2] and *Maryam al-Hakaya* (2002, *Maryam of Stories*)

---

[1] Hanan al-Shaykh was born in 1945 to a Shiʻa family in the South of Lebanon. After graduating from the American Girls College in Cairo, Egypt in 1966, she worked as a journalist for the Lebanese daily *al-Nahar* until 1975. At the outbreak of the Civil War, al-Shaykh immigrated to Saudi Arabia, and then to London, where she lives today. She has published eight novels (and two collections of short stories), including *Intihar Rajul Mayyit* (1970) (*Suicide of a Dead Man*), *Misk al-Ghazal* (1989) (translated as *Women of Sand and Myrrh*), *Barid Beirut* (1992) (translated as *Beirut Blues*) and most recently, *Hikayati Sharh Yatul* (2005) (translated as *The Locust and the Bird: My Mother's Story*). *The Story of Zahra*, published in Arabic in 1980 and in English in 1986, brought al-Shaykh fast literary prominence in the Arab world and the West.

[2] Born in Beirut in 1960, Najwa Barakat attended the Lebanese University and obtained a degree in theatre and film studies. She then moved to Paris, where she resides today and works as a journalist for Lebanese newspapers and radio stations. Additionally, she has worked in the past as a film writer and director. She has published six novels, five in Arabic and one in French. Among her novels are *Hayat wa Alam Hamad ibn Silana* (1995) (*The Life and Pains of Hamad ibn Silana*), *Bas al-Awadim* (1996) (*Busload of Good People*), which was awarded the Paris-based Lebanese Cultural Forum's Literary prize, *Lughat al-Sirr*

by Alawiyya Subuh[3] are three important novels with many similarities as well as key differences. I have divided the chapters of this dissertation by novel in an effort to highlight what is unique in each text while tracing common, shared themes and tropes throughout and consistently focusing on issues of gender, sexuality and violence. Through a narrow focus, I believe that broader concepts and ideas can better be brought to light. Close examination of the three texts will naturally draw out common themes, which I will now briefly outline.

Lebanese women writers in general, and al-Shaykh, Barakat and Subuh in particular, share common concerns, even as their novels remain distinct in important ways. All three novels share a focus on the body, which becomes a key battleground, the site of both oppression and resistance for women. Male characters objectify and oppress female characters by practicing violence upon their bodies. Female characters assert their subjectivities and liberation by claiming ownership over their own bodies, even if this means inflicting violence upon them. Subuh and al-Shaykh are similarly concerned with the textual body as well, demonstrating that it is through control of the narrative as subjects that their characters ultimately regain possession of their physical bodies.

The three novels are also bound by the intimate, female perspectives they provide of sex, sexuality and gender. Hanan al-Shaykh, Najwa Barakat and Alawiyya Subuh produced three of the most sexually explicit novels in modern Arabic literature,

---

(2004) (*The Language of Secrecy*), and *La locataire du Pot de fer* in French (1997). *Bas al-Awadim* was translated into French in 2002 (*Le bus des gens biens*) and *Ya Salaam* was translated into Italian in 2007.

[3] Alawiyya Subuh was born in Beirut in 1955. She studied Arabic literature at the Lebanese University as Beirut stood poised for the outbreak of the Civil War. Upon her graduation, she worked as a journalist and wrote literary articles and reviews for daily newspapers *al-Nida'* and *al-Nahar*. Subuh is the author of four novels. In addition to *Maryam of Stories* (2002), she has published *Nawm al-Ayyam* (1986) (*The Sleep of Days*), *Dunya* (2006), which is banned in Egypt, and *Ismuhu al-Gharam* (2009) (*It Is Called Love*). In 2006, *Dunya* received Oman's Sultan Qaboos Prize for Cultural Innovation. *Maryam of Stories* has been translated into French, German, and Italian. Subuh's last three novels have been the subject of tremendous popular and critical attention in the Arab world, catapulting her to regional fame.

particularly unique in their treatment of the female body and female sexuality. Their overt discussions of sex and sexuality have few parallels in the work of their male contemporaries, either within Lebanon or within modern Arabic literature as a whole. When male authors have written sexually explicit material, they have historically dealt only with the male perspectives and experiences of, for example, masturbation and sexual intercourse.

By recording their own tales of both illicit and culturally sanctioned sexual encounters, the female characters in these novels voice a previously silenced perspective. Further, by detailing sexual experiences forbidden by culture or religion, such as extramarital or inter-sectarian sex, they permanently preserve their successful, albeit fleeting, moments of rebellion against the patriarchal structures that attempt to control their bodies. At the same time, even by writing permissible sexual experiences, such as the intimate relationship between husband and wife, female characters and al-Shaykh, Barakat and Subuh along with them, challenge traditional male representations of women that have sought to keep their bodies, as long as they are wives and daughters rather than whores and prostitutes, cloaked in secrecy.

The need for such efforts on the part of women writers underlines the common theme treated in these three novels of the illusion of liberation and equality created by the city. The village and the generation it represents exist superficially, even if only in the background, as a patriarchally oppressive foil to the freedom of movement and sexual liberation experienced by the new generation of the city. However, all three novels reveal that the patriarchal structures of the village flourish in the urban environment as well, continuing to deny women the opportunity to constructively rebel, except perhaps

through writing. Furthermore, the village, even when it is just a shadow, highlights the importance of class in the negotiation of gender, sexuality and violence in the urban environment.

In their narratives, al-Shaykh, Barakat and Subuh trace an arc of despair in the present and future before locating a site for healing and hope. *The Story of Zahra*, offers salvation to Zahra by giving her a voice – her narration of her own death signals her final attainment of agency, an accomplishment that lives on after her. *Maryam of Stories* similarly grants Maryam and its other female characters release through the creation of a distinctly feminine, polyphonic and circular text. *Ya Salaam*, the bleakest of the three novels, gives Salaam the strength to resist the violation of her body and reverse traditional, gendered patterns of violence by murdering her own brother. Ultimately, however, Barakat views the war generation as beyond salvation, indicating a site of hope in the intervention of divine, sacred violence.

All three novels are also exceptional from Lebanese Civil War narratives by male authors in the significance they place on the relationships between women. These relationships are variously presented as caring and nurturing, abusive and damaging, and antagonistic and dangerous. The focus on interpersonal interactions and daily communication provides uncommon insight into the lives of Lebanese women, before, during and after the war.

On a paratextual level that is intimately related to the important role the three primary female protagonists play in their respective texts, the three novels are further bound together by their titles, which feature the name of each text's primary female protagonist, revealing a progression toward increasing agency. *The Story of Zahra* is the

tale of Zahra's life, told ultimately by her, but initially narrated by her uncle and husband. *Ya Salaam* is an address to the novel's principal female protagonist, and hints at dialogue and a certain embodiment in the creation of Salaam's identity. Finally *Maryam of Stories*, in which Maryam is brought into existence by the very stories she relates, grants its heroine the most fluidity and agency. While these narratives share many elements, this is an important difference between their perspectives.

I have chosen to focus on these three novels because they meet criteria prerequisite for the achievement of the goals outlined in this dissertation. I will now briefly review these criteria, along with their accompanying goals. First, I have chosen to focus on narratives by women writers in an effort to highlight their perspectives on the Civil War and treat the distinct issues that such texts raise. A sub-goal is the emphasis of new perspectives presented by these narratives within the larger framework of women writers, demonstrating the differences among women writers and their diversity. These three texts provide particular insight into the reality of post-war Lebanon. Second, I restrict my primary study to novels, or portions of novels in the case of *The Story of Zahra*, that have not been the subject of extensive study in an attempt to complicate and add to current understandings of the genre, particularly in the areas of gender, sexuality and violence.

Temporally, *The Story of Zahra* is set before and during the war, while both *Ya Salaam* and *Maryam of Stories* take place after the war, with flashbacks informing the reader of the environment that shaped the postwar world in which we meet their characters. *Ya Salaam* and *Maryam of Stories* contribute an important perspective to the field of Lebanese Civil War narratives because of their ability to comment on the effects

of the war on the city and on the population, in particular the war generation. Written and published over a decade after the end of the war, they provide a perspective nurtured by that distance. While *The Story of Zahra* was written during the war, its extensive treatment of prewar Beirut provides an interpretative jumping-off point for the explicitly postwar novels treated in this dissertation. Furthermore, a postwar reading of *The Story of Zahra* casts a different light on its prewar presentation when the reader sees that patriarchal structures remained entrenched after the war, proving that resistance during the war was in fact temporary or limited to individual accomplishments, without leading to corresponding fundamental changes within society. It is also interesting to note, through a comparison of *The Story of Zahra* and *Ya Salaam*, that many of the consequences of war that al-Shaykh feared for her characters, such as a lack of purpose in postwar society for men whose lives were dominated by the violent roles they adopted as militiamen or worse during the war itself, are borne out by Barakat's postwar reflection.

Geographically, it is significant that both al-Shaykh and Barakat wrote their novels abroad, in London and Paris respectively, while Subuh remained in Beirut, experiencing first-hand the war and its aftermath that she describes in *Maryam of Stories*. The result in Subuh's case is a more intimate perspective of the common, everyday details of Lebanese women's experience and a sophisticated understanding of the functioning of patriarchy and mechanisms of gendered oppression. In contrast, al-Shaykh and Barakat focus on individuals in Lebanese society who encounter structures of violence and patriarchy in particularly extreme ways. This spotlight on the margins encourages a sharp criticism of Lebanese social structures more broadly, without demonstrating the same sympathy for its victims, such as women, displayed by Subuh.

In a way, al-Shaykh and Barakat's detachment permits, depending on perspective, either a less nuanced or a more unbiased reading of the situation.

The second criterion for my selections, scholarly inattention, is supported by an examination of the available literature on these three novels. *The Story of Zahra* has been the subject of much critical and analytic scholarly attention, especially in English.[4] However, earlier scholarship focuses on the second half of the novel, largely ignoring the first half, which traces Zahra's childhood and formative experiences. I spend most of the chapter on *The Story of Zahra* treating this neglected material. In comparison with *Maryam of Stories* and *Ya Salaam*, which explore both the war and postwar Lebanese society in new ways, I believe that a discussion of the structures and patterns prevalent in prewar Lebanese society that contributed immensely to the shaping of gender and sexuality, as well as traditional forms of violence, is relevant for understanding the changes brought on by the war. This is particularly important in regards to my analytical focus on the interiority of the characters. Furthermore, I relocate this widely-read and translated novel within the corpus of world literature, allowing my analysis to benefit from a comparison of *The Story of Zahra* with Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, focusing on the similarities between Brontë and Rhys's madwoman, Bertha Mason, and Zahra.

Ya Salaam and *Maryam of Stories* have received little analytical attention, although both have been the subject of much journalistic and popular acclaim. This is due in part, I believe, to their later publication dates. The most exhaustive existing studies of Lebanese Civil War narratives were published during or in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War. In this sense, *Ya Salaam* and *Maryam of Stories* provide

[4] See, for example, Ghandour 231-249, Adams 201-216 and Abu al-Naja 170-184.

interesting insights into new perspectives provided by time, and in the case of *Ya Salaam*, distance, as the author was no longer living in Beirut at the time of writing. The subject matter covered in this dissertation, then, as mentioned above, has not been widely studied.

The chapters have been ordered chronologically in a sense, starting with *The Story of Zahra*, which begins before the war, followed by *Ya Salaam*, set in the war's immediate aftermath and concluding with *Maryam of Stories*, which takes place several years after the end of the war. Since the Civil War is so central to all three of the novels treated in this dissertation, I will now turn to a brief discussion of Lebanon's history so as to contextualize and historicize them and better situate the specifically Lebanese issues they raise as well as the themes they explore.

***

Lebanon's history has always been crowded with a plethora of competing voices, making its narration complex, nonlinear and highly politicized. One point on which all agree, however, is that Lebanon, and Beirut in particular, has always been a contested site, a site of struggle, often violent, and a site on which multiple groups seek to map their conflicting visions of the future. From this perspective, many historians, writers and film makers choose to chart Lebanon's past based on the conflicts it witnessed and the disasters, both political and natural, which befell it. The country's history is delineated based on intervals of unrest, interspersed with brief periods of peace during which Lebanon was able to develop and grow in unique ways.

In *The Tiller of Waters* (2001), Hoda Barakat[5] evokes this history, beginning with Beirut's legendary creation by Saturn and tracing the earthquakes that shook its foundations, the conquests that brought the city to its knees and the golden ages that built it up again. The narrator observes, "Beirut's soil is composted of layer upon layer of lives that have passed on. Beirut's soil is not like the soil of other cities, living by the movement of the winds along their surfaces, shifts that shape their edifices but do not pierce deep inside" (H. Barakat, 2001 32). The cycle of rise and fall has historically moved rapidly in Beirut, and yet it has never been abandoned, and has, in written history, always been widely and variously represented by historians, intellectuals, musicians, authors and artists.

Arab intellectuals and writers in particular, both at home and abroad, have struggled to find the appropriate voice in which to discuss the problems plaguing the city that was once considered "the Paris of the Middle East." Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish[6] expresses the challenge that faced writers and artists in particular, who were urged to separate their political agendas from their creative productions, or to use them solely for political purposes: "We want to heal the damage inflicted by the current trend to separate revolution from creativity and set the two in conflict, with one part trying to create a divorce between literary expression and reality in order to arrive at a 'pure

[5] Hoda Barakat was born in Beirut in 1952 to a Maronite family. She earned a degree in French literature from the Lebanese University and has been living in Paris since 1989. Hoda Barakat is the sister of Najwa Barakat.

[6] Mahmoud Darwish (1942-2008) was born in the village of Birwa, east of Acre in the Galilee. At the age of six, he fled with his family to Lebanon after their village was attacked by Zionist forces. He returned secretly with his family to Palestine in 1949, leaving again in 1970 for Moscow, then Cairo, until finally settling in Beirut in 1971. Much of Darwish's mature poetry and prose was composed in Beirut. Even while he longed for his homeland of Palestine, he developed a deep affection for the city. In 1982, after the Israeli bombardment of Beirut, Darwish left the city for Tunisia, and then Paris. Darwish finally returned to Ramallah in 1996. Until his death, Darwish continued to pay frequent visits to Beirut for literary events.

literature,' and the other pushing literature into providing a direct, daily service to the political program" (Darwish 137). The texts that succeeded in negotiating this binary – texts with artistic value as well as sociopolitical urgency – provided new visions for the future, new sites for hope and new understanding of old conflicts.

The internal and external catalysts for these periods of conflict as well as the extent of violence and number of losses sustained varied according to time and place. Most obviously, the roots of conflict could always be traced in one way or another to the confessional[7] and political sectarian differences that have divided Lebanon's population

---

[7] Lebanon is home to significant populations of Maronites, Druzes and Muslims, both Sunni and Shi'a.

The Sunni Muslim minority is spread throughout Lebanon, with traditionally large concentrations in the Lebanese coastal cities of Beirut, Sidon and Tripoli. The Sunni Muslims were part of the majority population of Greater Syria, the political entity that predated the creation of the state of Lebanon and encompassed what is today Syria and Lebanon. Because of this, the Sunni Muslim population largely resented the separation of Lebanon in 1920, which reduced them to a minority since Lebanon was already home to a number of confessional groups (See El Khazen 32-45). Still, many of the wealthiest and most influential families remain Sunni, and the prime minister is, according to the constitution, always Sunni, guaranteeing their continued political power.
For more information, see Sorenson 55-57.

Historians maintain that the origins of the Shi'a of Lebanon can be traced back to Yemen. Yemenite tribes, primarily the Twelver Shi'a of the tribe of Hamadan, migrated to Jabal 'Amil in what is today South Lebanon in the 7th and 8th centuries. When the Mamluks took control of the region after the departure of the Christian Crusaders in the early 14th century, the Shi'a community scattered, concealing their faith or converting to Sunni Islam as a result of the power of the Sunni Mamluks. Towards the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries, the Shi'a communities of Lebanon were concentrated in Jabal 'Amil, Baalbek and the Bekaa Valley. The 20th century witnessed major Shi'a migration from the rural south to Beirut, especially in the 1950s and 1960s. Most of these emigrants were peasants who, following the decline of agriculture in their villages, sought to join the labor force in the then blooming Beirut. The second half of the 20th century witnessed a Shi'a rise to political power in the region, thus boosting the political status of the Shi'a of Lebanon and making them a key player in domestic, regional, and international politics. They now represent a significant confessional minority in Lebanon, although they are largely denied political representation.
For more information on the Shi'a community in Lebanon, see Shanahan.

The Druzes consider themselves to be monotheists and a sect of Islam and their origins can be traced back to the 6th Egyptian Fatimid Caliph, al-Hakim bi-Amri Allah (996-1021). However, their relationship to Islam remains the subject of debate among many scholars. Today, the Druzes live all over the Levant— in Lebanon, Syria, Palestine/Israel, and Jordan. The Druze community has always played an important role in Lebanese politics, especially in the 19th and 20th centuries.

The origins of the Maronites can be traced back to the Abbot John Maron, who died in 400 AD. In *A House of Many Mansions: The History of Lebanon Reconsidered* (2005), Kamal Salibi asserts that it is

for the last two centuries. The quality that made the country so unique – its cultural, ethnic, religious and political diversity – also proved to be its greatest weakness, creating fractures that even when patched were destined to always split open anew, preventing the creation of a sustainable peace.

However, in *A History of Modern Lebanon* (2007), Fawwaz Traboulsi, drawing from a plethora of untapped archival and primary sources, argues that a historical approach limited to confessional politics fails to adequately account for economic and social factors. Indeed, an examination of the three novels discussed in this dissertation reveals a concern with issues such as class and culture, while religious identities are often pushed to the background. This is evidenced by the description in all three novels of characters' village roots, a characterization that identifies these individuals as Shi'a, but also highlights the relative poverty and lack of social status that they encounter in the city. Adopting a politico-economical approach, Traboulsi seeks to problematize existing histories and explore the production and solidification of the sectarian identities that have traditionally been foregrounded. Similarly, in this dissertation, I will treat socioeconomic factors that shape characters' negotiation of sexuality and gender, as well as their experiences and attitudes towards violence, as an important aspect of identity formation, starting from the second half of the 19th century.

---

likely that the Maronites as a community are descended from Arab origins and were among the last Arabian tribes to arrive in Syria before Islam. They settled in Mount Lebanon in 900 AD (Salibi 89). Matti Moosa states that "the Maronites are Syriac-Aramaic by culture and their church is a branch of the Syrian Church of Antioch" (Moosa 303). Today, they are largely considered to be a Catholic community with strong ties to Rome. The president of Lebanon is always Maronite, guaranteeing a powerful political presence despite their minority status.

The Ottomans controlled what is today Lebanon from 1516 to 1918.[8] With the quickening decline of the Empire in the 19th century, a number of foreign powers, and France in particular, began to cast an interested eye on the region. Upon the outbreak of hostilities between the Druzes and the Maronites in 1860, France, as a Catholic country, felt compelled to intervene on behalf of the Catholic community of Maronites in Mount Lebanon, which had suffered great losses at the hands of the Druzes of Mount Shouf. Traboulsi observes that French motivations were political and economic as well. Mount Lebanon was an important center of silk production for Lyons, where half of the population "[was] engaged in the silk economy, which generated around a third of its total revenue" (Traboulsi 46). The fighting had disrupted the factories, and one of Napoleon III's primary missions was to "rebuild the silk-reeling factories and bring the workers back to work," thus setting the sericulture industry back on track (Traboulsi 38). Finally, the French intervention was part of Napoleon III's military expansion project: "Napoleon III had already launched his dream of an Arab kingdom in Algeria, and he envisaged his intervention in Mount Lebanon as an outlier of his Maghreb project: an Arab kingdom, attached to France, led by its faithful ally, Emir 'Abd al-Qadir, whose entity would play the role of a buffer state between Anatolia and the Suez Canal" (Traboulsi 38). French intervention led to the establishment in 1861 of an independent

[8] Fawwaz Traboulsi mentions in *A History of Modern Lebanon* (2007) that the Emirate of Mount Lebanon was socioeconomically and politically governed by the *iqta*' (feudal) system "which allotted tax-farming rights in mountainous or desert areas to ethnic or tribal chiefs under the control of the Ottoman walis. The holders of *iqta*', the muqta'ji families, enjoyed varying degrees of autonomy in running the affairs of the *iqta*' as long as they provided the High Porte with the fixed amount of purses, supplied armed men when in need and generally kept order in the regions under their control" (Traboulsi 3). (The High Porte, known in Arabic as al-Bab al-'Ali (the high door) is a reference to the court of the Ottoman Empire, and is a synecdoche for the central Ottoman government in Istanbul.)

district of Mount Lebanon, where there was a Maronite majority.[9] This district remained within the government administration of the Ottoman Empire, but was under the implicit protection of France.

The first Lebanese Civil War also broke out in 1860. Many historians trace the roots of the conflict to a quarrel that occurred between two boys, one Druze and the other Maronite, in the town of Beit-Merri.[10] The quarrel escalated to a feud between their families, which in turn expanded into clashes and sporadic outbursts of fighting that spread to the neighboring towns and once again pitted Druzes against Maronites. Between March and June of that year, the violence developed into open civil war that drowned the towns and villages of the Druzes and Maronites in blood.[11]

---

[9] Leila Fawaz sheds light on the nature of the social life and values in Mount Lebanon in this period. She explains that "the birth of a son was an occasion for particular rejoicing. In Christian villages and towns, pregnant women prayed to the Virgin to give them sons, promising in return to dress the baby in monk's clothing for a stretch of time of their choice during his childhood." (Fawaz, 1994 32). She goes on to describe the culture's adulation of sons as well as their maturation process by emphasizing that in return they "defended family and community and upheld its honor. For that they were ready to kill and be killed. Even a sibling who shamed the family name- a sister seen with other men, for example- could incur severe punishments at their hands." (Fawaz, 1994 32).

[10] See Churchill 133 and Fawaz, 1994 45.

[11] Intellectual responses to the civil war were common and varied. One of the most well-known and thorough responses was made by Butrus al-Bustani.

Founder of the National School in 1863 and creator of the first Arabic encyclopedia, Butrus al-Bustani (1819-1883) was from a prominent Maronite intellectual family. He was one of the most influential Arab intellectuals of the 19th century. al-Bustani worked with the American Protestant missionaries in Beirut, teaching them Arabic and then helping them in their project of translating the Bible into Arabic.

Butrus al-Bustani wrote 11 Arabic pamphlets known collectively as *Nafir Suriyya* (1860-1861) (*The Clarion Call of Syria*) in response to the civil war and the damage it caused. In them, al-Bustani criticized the sectarianism plaguing the country. He addressed these pamphlets to the "abna' al-watan" (compatriots) and each one was signed "muhibb li'l-watan" (literally, lover of the homeland, or patriot). Al-Bustani was searching for a new bond that would transcend religious, sectarian and political affiliations. This is one of the earliest appearances of the concept of the nation in Arabic.

Ussama Makdisi explains that al-Bustani "advocated a secular, liberal citizenship that was far more explicit than anything Ottoman statesmen had envisioned, a citizenship that was not simply decreed by imperial fiat but that was developed, taught, and embraced simultaneously at an imperial and local level" (Makdisi, 2002 605).

France again intervened on behalf on the Maronites, while Britain supported the Druzes. International involvement further complicated the civil war, a theme that was to be repeated in future conflicts. The outcome of the civil war was disastrous: it is estimated that there were between 7,000 and 12,000 casualties, not to mention the even higher number of wounded.[12] This civil war was just the beginning, however, as Lebanon has continued to serve as a battlefield for competing local, regional and international interests, frequently leading to political disputes and violent conflicts between the many, diverse sectarian communities of Lebanon.

Already a steadily growing commercial center with strong ties to Europe, especially France, Beirut's population swelled further as it became a refuge for Christians fleeing the waves of violence engulfing their villages and towns in Mount Lebanon. The present-day distribution of religious and ethnic groups in Beirut is due at least in part to this influx of immigration.

The violence of this civil war bypassed Beirut proper, allowing it to focus on the absorption and exploitation of European economic interests in the city. Its development was fueled by "post-*Tanzimat* modernisation and centralisation processes," driven by the weakening Ottoman Empire in its final attempt to consolidate power (Traboulsi 52). Beirut was simultaneously transformed into an important access point to the region for French and British interests, as "the Beirut-Damascus axis became the main avenue of international trade in the eastern Mediterranean" (Traboulsi 52). According to Salim Bustani, Beirut developed into "the door from which the West enters the East and the

[12] Stanford J. Shaw and Ezel K. Shaw report that "over 300 villages, 500 churches, 40 monasteries, and 30 schools were destroyed. Christian attacks on Muslims in Beirut stirred the predominantly Muslim population of Damascus to attack the Christian minority, with over 25,000 of the latter being killed" (Shaw and Shaw 143).

East accedes to the West" (qtd. in Traboulsi 55). In the end, the devastating effects of the civil war on the area of Mount Lebanon combined with Europe's growing interest in the urban center contributed to the shift of the Lebanese political, economic and cultural center from Mount Lebanon to Beirut

While the growing urban port of Beirut was able for the time being to keep its focus on economic growth and commercial, educational and cultural development, becoming an educational and cultural center as early as the 19th century, the newly arrived immigrants, from Mount Lebanon as well as from the rural South, imported their competing traditions and cultural differences to the city. The combination of such various ethnic, religious and sectarian communities not only changed the demographic map of Beirut forever, but also planted the seeds for future disputes and violence. At the same time, "internal migration was an important factor in diversifying the city's economic activities and helped create a plural urban society characterised by fluid social mobility" (Traboulsi 56).

In "The City and the Mountain: Beirut's Political Radius in the Nineteenth Century as Revealed in the Crisis of 1860" (1984), Leila Fawaz confirms that the growing interdependence between Beirut and Mount Lebanon:

> increasingly took the form of Beirut's ascendancy over the Mountain. […] But Beirut's triumph as the dominant partner in the relationship was not an unmixed blessing: While bringing prosperity to the city, it also transferred to Beirut many of the unresolved tensions of the Mountain, preparing the way for the city's sectarian rivalries and tensions in more recent times (Fawaz, 1984 489).

Following the 1919 Ottoman defeat in WWI, Lebanon became an independent administrative system, separate from Syria, under the French Mandate. Although

"France justified its claim to Syria by the necessary defence of the Christian, Druze, 'Alawi and Shi'a minorities," its interests were in reality far less altruistic. An earlier mission to the region had decided that "the region was worth colonising," and viewed the newly created Lebanon in particular as a gateway to greater Syria. (Traboulsi 75). During this period, the French were tasked with creating a centralized state and a domestic political system with a civil code that would guarantee a secular state.[13] However, establishing and maintaining a balance of power between the various political and confessional communities in Lebanon, thus minimizing the likelihood of additional violence and conflict in the country, remained a serious challenge to all parties.

With the intensification of WWII and opposition rising against the French Mandate in Lebanon and Syria, Lebanon became an independent state in 1943 and the French left the country in 1946. Following its independence, Lebanon witnessed a rapid economic boom and Beirut became the site of a major cultural and intellectual awakening in the Arab world, attracting a large number of students and intellectuals from various parts of the region. Due to the freedom of expression enjoyed in Beirut, unparalleled in the rest of the contemporary Arab world, the city became not only a new home for students, writers and artists, but was also recognized as the quickly rising capital of the Arabic publishing industry.

The 1948 Arab-Israeli War (the Arab defeat is known as the *nakba*[14], or the catastrophe) displaced about 760,000 Palestinians, 104,000 of whom sought refuge in the

[13] According to David D. Grafton, the French efforts culminated in the creation of the Lebanese constitution of 1926. He explains that "the changes that took place between 1920 and 1926 were monumental. Movement from membership in an Islamic empire, governed by the Sultan, to citizenship in a multi-confessional state, headed by a Christian president, was a distinct and problematic issue according to Muslim classical law" (Grafton 94).

[14] The Arabic term, *al-nakba*, was coined by Syrian Christian intellectual Constantine Zurayk (1909-2000) in his well-known book, *Ma'na al-Nakba* (1948) (*The Meaning of the Catastrophe*). Upon earning his PhD

neighboring country of Lebanon[15]. This massive wave of immigration would complicate domestic politics for decades to come, as a new community, the Palestinians, became part of the already diverse ethnic fabric of Lebanon. They brought with them a significant amount of capital and Beirut "took over Hayfa's role as the main port of the Arab hinterland and as an international communication centre between Europe, Asia and some parts of Africa" (Traboulsi 113). At the same time, however, the loss of the Palestinian market dealt a severe blow to Lebanon's economy, and the influx of poor refugees outweighed the benefits of middle-class and rich newcomers.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the Arab world witnessed a rapidly growing enthusiasm among the population for pan-Arabism and a swelling of nationalist feelings, energized by Nasser's rise to power in Egypt. Nasser's political aspirations deepened the already widening rift in Lebanon between the Muslim community and nationalist and leftist groups on one side and President Camille Chamoun and the majority of the Christian Maronites on the other. Nasser's supporters favored his Arabism, while Christian groups feared that such sentiments would permanently render them a powerless minority and supported an ideology of Lebanonism. Charles Winslow argues in *Lebanon: War and Politics in a Fragmented Society* (1996) that in actuality

> the state apparatus was developed and maintained to protect the one Christian country in the Middle East. Several militias had been originated to help keep the country Christian and separate, and they were available to help the beleaguered president whose own army, drawn from Greater Lebanon, might not remain loyal to him (Winslow 107).

---

from Princeton University, Zurayk became a professor of history at the American University of Beirut, later becoming its president. His teaching left indelible marks on many of his students, including Palestinian Christian nationalist George Habash (1926-2008), who would go on to found the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP).

[15] The numbers of Palestinians who fled to Lebanon is subject to much debate.

The growing mistrust among and the increasing fragility of relations between the various communities and factions within Lebanon led to the country's second major civil conflict in 1958.

Lebanon was further divided over a series of events, including The Suez Canal War in 1956 and US President Dwight D. Eisenhower's efforts to confront what he considered the rapid spread of communism and its potential support for Arab nationalism in the Middle East. The flourishing of Arab nationalism culminated in 1958 with the formation of the United Arab Republic, which temporarily united Egypt and Syria.[16] The fervor and excitement ignited by the success of watershed political events such as these energized the Lebanese forces that saw their country as part of the Arab world. They were empowered to openly oppose President Chamoun and his supporters who saw no benefit in the cutting of political ties with the West. This division soon turned violent, and all of the myriad parties, fronts, factions, militias and communities took part in the chaotic conflict. All of the forces that fell under the large umbrella of the opposition were brought together by their shared desire to overthrow Chamoun's government. During this time, a rapidly widening rift developed between the President and the Commander in Chief, General Fouad Chehab. Civil strife, in the form of political disputes as well as violent clashes, continued its uncontrollable spread across the country throughout the summer.

Upon President Chamoun's request, Eisenhower directly intervened by sending a surprise detachment of 20,000 US troops to Lebanon in July to prevent the potential

---

[16] Many Syrian politicians and army generals felt threatened by Nasser's policies, which resulted in the marginalization of their power. Such actions contributed to the dissolution of the United Arab Republic shortly after its formation.

collapse of the government and the rise to power of the Arab nationalists supported by Nasser. The minor civil war ended with the resignation of President Chamoun and the appointment of Fouad Chehab as the new President of Lebanon. Fouad Chehab, as commander of the army, had succeeded in preventing the US troops from entering Beirut after reaching an agreement with them to work together to end the civil war.

This intervention helped to temporarily save the fragile Lebanese state from collapse, although it remained more or less defenseless in the face of growing sectarian, religious and ethnic tension that threatened its existence. The new president was only able to suppress outright fighting, while the tension between the sectarian and religious groups continued to simmer until it could no longer be contained by the fragile state structure. Each community desired political control of the country, and feared the outcome of a rival group's rise to power. For its part, the state suffered from a lack of consensus on Lebanon's national character and its vision for the future as well as the nonexistence of a well-established civil society or a dependable domestic political system.

Fouad Chehab managed to maintain a state of semi-stability and to more or less keep the peace by concentrating on power sharing between the major opponents in the country. Employing a unifying slogan, "no winners, no losers", he managed to fortify his government by co-opting Pierre Gemayel[17], the founder of the Lebanese Phalanges,

---

[17] Pierre Gemayel (1905-1984) was born to a Maronite family. He was the father of two of Lebanon's presidents: Bashir, who was assassinated in Beirut in 1982 at the age of thirty-four, and Amine, who was president from 1982-1988. Pierre Gemayel was among the prominent voices of resistance to the French Mandate and established the Phalange paramilitary group (al-Kataeb al-Lubnaniyya) in 1936, which was composed of young Maronites whose objective was to empower the Maronites by emphasizing their status as the dominant population of Greater Lebanon.

Kamal Jumblatt, the founder of the Progressive Socialist Party[18], and the Sunni Muslim leader Rashid Karami[19]. This arrangement did not solve the problem, however, as it "was limited to establishing sectarian equilibrium rather than abolishing sectarianism" (Traboulsi 140).

Despite the battering the city took, Beirut continued to thrive in the 1960s, forming a distinctive urban mosaic driven by economic and financial development and political, intellectual and cultural activities. The city continued to be characterized by its liberal openness, multiculturalism and multilingualism. It was also a bustling entertainment center, with great restaurants, nightclubs, art exhibitions, and theaters. The image of Beirut as a cultural capital and intellectual center in the Arab world would remain in the minds of many Arabs and became the subject of nostalgic representations by writers and artists, a trend that continues today.

The 1967 defeat of the Arab armies by Israel in the June War resulted in a new influx of Palestinian refugees to the neighboring countries and reaffirmed the strength of the Israeli army. The hope for the liberation of Palestine and the return of the Palestinians to their homeland that had been cultivated among Arab political leaders and intellectuals, as well as among the Arab people, in the period following the 1948 defeat, were crushed once again. This defeat made it clear that the route to the liberation of Palestine must take a focused, military course. With this in mind, Fatah and other Palestinian groups exchanged their vision of Pan-Arabism for one of targeted Palestinian

[18] Kamal Jumblatt (1917-1977), a well-known Druze leader, established the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) in 1949, the primary objective of which was the rejection of the sectarian nature of the Lebanese government. Historically, the largest contingent of party supporters has been the Druzes. Jumblatt was assassinated in 1977.

[19] Born in Tripoli, Rashid Karami (1921-1987) was an important Sunni figure, who came from a well-to-do and politically powerful family. He served as Lebanese Prime Minister eight times, until his 1987 assassination in a helicopter explosion.

resistance, recognizing that that such a movement needed time to re-group in neighboring countries – first in Jordan and later in Lebanon.

On September 15, 1970, the Jordanian army, in an attempt to suppress the Palestinian resistance that had begun to use Jordan as a base and assert its independence from the rule of the Jordanian monarchy, undertook a ten day campaign against the Palestinian refugee camps that was later to become known as Black September.[20] Over 3000 Palestinians were killed in the offensive and the PLO moved its base to Lebanon, strengthening the Palestinian presence in the country by taking control of the previously leaderless refugee camps and further complicating the delicate balance between the country's many different factions.[21] At the time of the PLO relocation to Lebanon, there were already 300,000 Palestinian refugees living in the country.

From its strategic vantage point in southern Lebanon, the PLO was able to operate more or less independently of the Lebanese government as it and Israel exchanged blows. The victims of Israeli attacks were just as often southern Shi'a civilians as they were Palestinian guerrillas, causing a further exodus northwards to Beirut, which contributed to the creation of a "poverty belt" around the city of more than 500,000 people. This urbanization of the population was extremely rapid. Traboulsi explains that "while most of the community [the Shi'a] was rural in the post-independence years, more than three-

---

[20] Cleveland 352-354.

[21] Farid El Khazen in *The Breakdown of the State in Lebanon: 1967-1976* (2000) provides a detailed account of the Palestinian guerrilla and political activities in Lebanon from the 1960s until the outbreak of the Civil War in 1975. He explains that following Black September and the relocation of the Palestinian resistance to Lebanon, the movement was able to flourish: "In open and free-wheeling Lebanon the PLO was able to recover from the Jordan war. Lebanon, once again, was true to its 'last refuge' role, now for the Palestinian Resistance in its post-Jordan phase (1972-1975). By the mid-1970s, the PLO attained unprecedented power at all political, diplomatic and military levels. By then, confrontation between an expanding PLO and Lebanese groups became inevitable" (El Khazen 132).

.

For a detailed discussion of the Palestinian presence in Lebanon and its development into a powerful force in Lebanese politics, see El Khazen 129-234.

quarters of it had become urbanised by the 1970s." (Traboulsi 162). The roots of this population can also be traced to the agricultural crisis of the 1970s. Tobacco farmers in the Shi'a south, an industry in which Zahra's family participated before the move to the city, were controlled by a monopoly, the *Régie,* which exploited the system and its workers. This same monopoly had exclusive control over the export and manufacture of cigarettes.[22] In a fascinating, though probably not uncommon, twist, Zahra is later employed by the *Régie* factory in Beirut. This is where she meets her lover, Malek.

The Palestinian issue became divisive, with growing support from the Muslim population that felt frustrated by the corrupt government, dominated by a Christian minority that continued to benefit from earlier power-sharing agreements that completely disenfranchised the Shi'a population and denied the Sunni population fair representation. Palestinians were denied any rights whatsoever.

Mahmoud Darwish, living in Beirut during the Israeli invasion, describes the events of a single day (Hiroshima Day) in *Memory for Forgetfulness* (1995). This novel-length piece of prose poetry is divided into sections, many of which deal directly with the plight of the Palestinians. At one point he describes the feelings of alienation experienced by the Palestinian immigrants living in Lebanon:

> "You're aliens here," they say to them [the Palestinians] there.
> "You're aliens here," they say to them here" (Darwish 13).

While many Lebanese communities, such as the Druzes, the Sunni Muslims and some Maronite Leftists, did support the Palestinian cause, the Maronites in power strongly opposed their presence in Lebanon, effectively denying them a permanent home.

---

[22] Traboulsi 158-159 and 165.

In 1969, Kamal Jumblatt, the leader of the Druze community, recognized the new challenges facing Lebanon and created an umbrella movement known as the Lebanese National Movement that brought together the different Muslim groups. According to William Cleveland, their goals were "administrative reform, the abolition of the confessional basis of politics, and freedom of action for the Palestinian commandos" (Cleveland 374).

The Christian Maronite political leaders, recognizing the threat to their power and the structures that ensured its continuation, organized into two powerful factions: the Phalange, led by Pierre Gemayel, and Camille Chamoun's private militia, the Tigers. Since the government seemed unable to suppress the Palestinians, these two groups decided to move against them.

When Suleiman Frangieh[23] assumed the presidency in 1970, the government became increasingly corrupt and nepotistic, abandoning Fouad Chehab's programs for peace and reform. The rising tension was captured in contemporary Lebanese literature, perhaps no more strikingly than in Ghada Samman's[24] prophetic *Beirut '75* (1995), published directly before the outbreak of the Civil War. The frustration expressed by all five of the novel's primary characters and highlighted by the rising sense of rebellion among the fishermen in the tale illuminates the oppression and poverty that was one of the underlying causes for the scope of the conflict. Traboulsi observes that "between 1967 and 1975 the cost of living had doubled, and during this time Beirut had been

---

[23] Born to a well-known Maronite family, Suleiman Frangieh (1910-1992) served as a cabinet member in the Lebanese government eight times, from 1960 until 1970, when he became president of Lebanon. He developed strong ties with former Syrian President Hafez al-Assad during his term, and it was well-know that there was a strong rivalry between him and his family and the Gemayel family. His presidency ended in 1976, after the start of the Civil War.

[24] Samman was born in Damascus, Syria in 1942.

classified as more expensive than Washington [DC]" (Traboulsi 160). The city continued to develop, but with little regard for the poorest segment of society: "on the eve of the war, there were between 40,000 and 50,000 empty luxury apartments in Beirut alone, while successive waves of migrants from the rural areas crammed into shantytowns and squats and ravaged entire suburbs" (Traboulsi 160). The government's failure to meet basic human needs and provide social services helps explain the lack of loyalty felt by much of the population.

In a powerful scene, Mustafa records the fishermen's grievances on the back of a sandwich wrapper as they take shelter from a storm in a small, back alley café. He writes: "we're waging a war on all fronts: against nature, against the negligence of the authorities, against poverty" (Samman, 1995 58). Samman's clairvoyance seems to be confirmed in an earlier scene in which the fortuneteller, Faiza, predicts the violence to come: "'I see much grief, and I see blood – a great deal of blood.' Then she started to gasp and shudder, witnessing in her mind's eye a future massacre" (Samman, 1995 49).

At the same time that workers were striking en masse against issues such as low minimum wage and monopolies, students were becoming increasingly active on campus, mobilizing against fees, teacher wages and lack of scholarship and job opportunities after graduation. According to Traboulsi, in the days leading up to the Civil War, "student demonstrations, at times 25,000-strong, became an everyday scene in Beirut and major Lebanese cities" (Traboulsi 170). These are the movements that the new generation of women, such as Ibtisam and Maryam, participate in with such fervor in *Maryam of Stories*.

The Civil War began in April 1975, when a group of Phalangists attacked a busload of unarmed Palestinians as it passed through a Christian neighborhood of Beirut, killing about thirty of them. This was in retaliation for the wounding a few hours earlier of a number of Phalangists, who were standing outside of a church when someone opened fire on them from a car. This initial catalyst led to a conflict between the PLO and the Christian groups. The fighting expanded into full-fledged civil war between a myriad of factions, roughly represented by the Muslim Lebanese National Movement and the Christian Maronite Phalange. In time, this division of loyalties led to a physical division of Beirut as well into Muslim West Beirut and Christian East Beirut. Formerly integrated communities in East Beirut were largely emptied of their Muslim inhabitants, as they fled or were expelled. The same can be said of Muslim West Beirut and its Christian population. Crossing the green line, the boundary separating East and West Beirut, was an extremely dangerous enterprise.

The green line gained special significance in creative representations of the war. In Hoda Barakat's *The Stone of Laughter* (1995), Naji, a Muslim character living in West Beirut, crosses the green line in part to prove "that the Green Line that runs through Beirut doesn't exist for him" (H. Barakat, 1995 24). In other words, Beirut – all of Beirut – is still his city.

Similarly, in *Sitt Marie Rose* (1978)[25] by Etel Adnan[26], Marie Rose is a Christian Lebanese woman who is an outspoken advocate for the Palestinians and crosses the green line to work with them in the camps and continue her romantic relationship with a Muslim Palestinian man. Marie Rose is also a teacher of deaf-mute children. For her

[25] *Sitt Marie Rose* was first published in an Arabic translation in 1977; the French original was published in France in 1978.
[26] Etel Adnan was born in 1925 to a Greek mother and a Syrian father.

involvement with the Palestinians, she is put on trial in her classroom by four Christian militia men, who execute her when she refuses to repent for her alleged crimes. As part of her defense, Marie Rose explains: "I don't consider the Palestinians an enemy. They belong to the same ancestral heritage the Christian party does. They're really our brothers" (Adnan 54). In this way, she exposes the increasingly entrenched sectarianism underlying the green line, and demonstrates her refusal to participate in the process of division it involves.[27]

Cleveland explains that "the Lebanese army began to disintegrate into its confessional components, as officers and troops defected in order to join militia organizations that reflected their religious affiliation." As the city became increasingly chaotic, it became "a collection of sectarian enclaves, each defended by its own militia organization" (Cleveland 375-376).

The 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon aimed to accomplish the goals that Israel had failed to achieve in its initial 1978 invasion. Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Minister of Defense Ariel Sharon had three main objectives: "the destruction of the PLO as a fighting force; the withdrawal of the Syrian occupying troops […] and the forging of a mutually advantageous alliance with the dominant Maronite faction," led by Bashir Gemayel (Cleveland 377).

International intervention headed by France and the United States of America, encouraged by the Begin government, led to the evacuation of PLO members and the installation of Bashir Gemayel as president. However, he was assassinated just two

[27] During her interrogation by the militia men, Marie Rose exposes another important boundary that she, as a woman, has crossed. Traditionally, politics was the domain of men alone and her involvement with the Palestinians challenges the exclusivity of this patriarchal arrangement: "she was a woman […] mixing in politics, which is normally their [the men's] personal hunting ground" (Adnan 100).

weeks after his election, and the Israeli army responded by entering West Beirut and allowing the Phalange to massacre more than 1,000 Palestinians residing in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps. These events, which met with both international and domestic Israeli criticism, led to Begin and Sharon's resignations. The PLO relocated to Tunis.

The Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon began in 1983 and was completed in 1985, although Israel continued to occupy a "security zone" in southern Lebanon until 2000. The new Lebanese president, Amine Gemayel, faced with continued resistance, turned to Syria for help, leading to a Syrian military presence in Lebanon that lasted until 2005.

As the war continued, it created an economic crisis as the country continued to increase its imports while virtually eliminating all exports. National debt grew as the militias took control of income-generating functions, collecting taxes and tribute, handling administrative tasks such as granting building permits, controlling the ports and customs duties, and the cost of living rose.[28] In time, after the militias had successfully divided the city into autonomous territories, they focused on the control and exploitation of their "subjects". Rather than continuing to fight with neighboring militias, they began to work together "for a better spoliation and control of everything Lebanese" (Traboulsi 231). The militias became sophisticated organized crime networks, participating in arms and drug trafficking, smuggling, outright bank robbery and even piracy.[29] They also took control of the distribution of flour and fuel, benefiting enormously from taxes and speculation.[30]

Traboulsi argues that ultimately, "the war, partially the result of sectarian conflicts, was to become the crucible in which those sects were reproduced" (Traboulsi

---

[28] Traboulsi 227-228.
[29] Traboulsi 234-235.
[30] Traboulsi 236.

229). Once the city was successfully divided into what Traboulsi calls cantons, “pressure on the individual to define himself/herself in terms of a unique social and cultural sectarian identity reached its climax” (Traboulsi 233). In an effort to maintain their power, those with vested interests in the current division of the city, the militia leaders and others who profited economically from the new system, worked hard for “the eradication of all memories of coexistence and common interests between Lebanese. Instead, they imposed their discourse of ‘protection’ on their own ‘people’: the ‘other’ wants to kill you, but we are here to save your lives” (Traboulsi 233). In this way, the militias justified their continued power and prolonged the Civil War, while simultaneously re-shaping Lebanese history to reflect the sectarianism that they intentionally nurtured. The Civil War finally came to an end with the 1989 Ta’if Agreement, although its actual implementation occurred in stages and it failed to undo the psychological, economic and identitarian damage that the war had caused.

The flawed characters in *Ya Salaam* and *Maryam of Stories* are evidence of the extent of this damage postwar, while *The Story of Zahra* provides an intimate glimpse of the development of these processes during the war, such as those that lead to Zahra’s breakdown. Alawiyya the character’s hospitalization in a mental institution following the war similarly demonstrates its long-term psychological effects. From an economic perspective, Zahra’s brother Ahmad is proof of the inherent destructiveness of the war economy. Later, Luqman visibly struggles in the aftermath of the war to find a way to make a living when he can no longer profit from his position in the militia. Finally, the theory of sectarianism put forth by Traboulsi is supported by both Yasmeen and Ibtisam,

whose complex sense of self are only eclipsed by their confessional identities at the end of the war.

***

During the Civil War, Beirut became a dangerous place dominated by fear and haunted by death. Faced with daily tragedy, authors were compelled to confront the menacing demons of helplessness, hopelessness and terror that stalked not only their own dreams, but those of the collective population as well, whether they dreamed their nightmares of torture and explosions, checkpoints and snipers, in East or West Beirut.

The boundaries of the personal and the collective blurred. An author's story, and many of the Civil War narratives are autobiographical in one sense or another, was also the story of her neighbor, apartment building or quarter – a theme explored at length in Alawiyya Subuh's *Maryam of Stories*.

Writing also transcended its therapeutic function to become a performative act, by which the reality of the city could be reassembled and the damages it had sustained could be repaired. As the war continued, more and more literary narratives appeared. Even today, twenty years after its unofficial end, Lebanese authors, both at home and abroad, are still writing about the Civil War, adding to the growing sub-genre of Lebanese Civil War Narratives.

Since the rise of the Arabic novel and short story in the early twentieth century, Arabic fiction in general has become an increasingly important forum for the discussion, negotiation and confrontation of political, social and cultural ideas, ideologies and issues ranging from questions of national identity, to explorations of different forms of

oppression and more recently, encompassing debates about the concepts and interrelationships of sexuality, gender and violence. Associated with progressive politics and considered an integral part of culture, the Arabic narrative form in general and the novel in particular have evolved into the quintessential literary genres for articulating the complexities and intricacies surrounding fluctuating gender and sexuality roles within the political and often violent contexts that define societies in many parts of the contemporary Arab world.

The Arabic novel explores pressing social and political realities by means of sophisticated textual forms that encourage a variety of ideological perspectives and a fluidity of power relations. Thus, the Arabic novel is a form of meaningful plurality, encompassing social multiplicity and competing voices arranged in a dialogical setting.

Due largely to political, religious and cultural censorship that has historically limited freedom of expression in literature, Arab authors have adapted a variety of experimental forms and had wide recourse to creative innovation to circumvent established boundaries and treat taboo subjects. This included criticism of corrupt governments and systemized political oppression of course, but it also allowed for the discussion of sex and sexuality.

In shifting their attention from a realist mode of representation to experimental ones, Arab authors have also used these new forms of expression to shed light on the various states of interiority or the inner dialogues of the novel's characters. This experimental tendency has opened new trajectories for Arab fiction writers to refine narrative techniques that had been employed to some extent by the 1960s generation, such as interior monologue, stream-of-consciousness, multiple voices, fragmentation, and

nonlinear narratives, to depict variable temporal and spatial modalities, fluidity and relativity of meaning, and discontinuity, ambiguity and improbability in their stories. This has resulted in a full spectrum of narratives that set out to explore more profoundly the interior psychological effects of oppression, repression, desire, gender, and sexuality, shaping characters that are unresolved, constantly developing and more complex.

These techniques were employed by the authors of many Lebanese civil war narratives who attempted to capture their chaotic and ambiguous impressions of the war through experimentation, stream of consciousness and fractured narratives. Two of the masters of this form are Elias Khoury and Rashid al-Daif.

Al-Jabal Al-Saghir (1977) (*Little Mountain*) by Elias Khoury[31] is a seminal work in the field of Lebanese Civil War narratives. Stylistically, its postmodern, fragmented style and plethora of voices mirrors the disorientation, chaos and sense of internal division prevalent during the Civil War. Set in Ashrafiyye, a predominantly Christian neighborhood in Beirut, the novel follows five male characters in their attempts to comprehend the war in which they have been caught. Female characters, when present, are denied any sort of liberation from the violence and oppression that characterize their lives.

Al-Mustabid (1983) (*The Obstinate*) by Rashid al-Daif[32] follows the search of the narrator, also named Rashid, for a young woman with whom he has had a sexual encounter during the Israeli bombing of Beirut. The encounter occurs by chance while they are taking shelter and the young woman accidentally sits on his lap. Rashid, a

[31] Elias Khoury is a prominent Lebanese essayist, writer and public intellectual. He was born in Beirut in 1948.
[32] Well-known novelist Rashid al-Daif was born to a Christian Maronite family in Northern Lebanon in 1945.

university professor, strives throughout the text to identify the young woman and find her again.

Fushah Mustahdafah bayna al-Nu‘as wal-Nawm (1986, translated as *Passage to Dusk*), also by Rashid al-Daif, is a surreal text in which the protagonist narrates his own imagined death after he is wounded. However, he provides several different, conflicting accounts of the events leading to his accidental installment in a morgue when he is believed to dead. The external violence of the war and its internalization, expressed in nightmares, become indistinguishable.

In both texts, al-Daif uses language and style, as well as the absurd, to reflect the psychic fragmentation as well as the elusiveness of truth and reality that are products of the seemingly endless civil war. He also focuses extensively in these and other novels on questions of identity, questions that were granted new significance in a city at war with itself, where the enemy could often be identified by no more than a name. al-Daif highlights this element in his fiction through his use of unreliable narrators, whose identities are often in question.

While al-Daif and Khoury represent two very important voices of Arabic literature more generally and the Lebanese Civil War narrative in particular, their primacy highlights the traditional marginalization of Arab women writers, whose early contributions to modern Arabic literature received little recognition.

Contemporary women’s writing in the Arab world engages with culturally, socially and politically imperative issues involving women’s positions within societal and familial structures. There is a long, rich tradition of female authorship in the Arab world, starting with the pre-Islamic poet, al-Khansa’ (575-664) and of course the figure of

Shahrazad in the *Arabian Nights*. Throughout the pre-modern era, women from among the elite, such as Wallada Bint al-Mustakfi, continued to add to this tradition through the composition of Arabic poetry, and their voices were joined by female Sufi poets, such as Rabi'a al-'Adawiya as well as slave-girl poets.[33]

In the second half of the nineteenth century as girls were being given access to first primary and then higher education, women began to contribute in meaningful ways to the field of journalism as well as to the emerging genre of the Arabic novel. Zaynab Fawwaz[34] (1846-1914) and Mayy Ziyada[35] (1886-1941) addressed women's issues in the Egyptian press, linking many of their discussions to questions of national and religious identity.[36] The advent of equal access to education and the later Arab feminist movement, driven in the twentieth century by women such as journalist, novelist and activist Nawal El Saadawi[37] (b. 1931), fostered a resurgence of the female Arab literary tradition. However, such developments were often driven externally, by Western colonial and neo-colonial forces, thought and even forms, as evidenced by the importation of the novel and the subsequent process of adaptation it underwent, creating internal contradictions that have yet to be fully resolved.

The narratives written by contemporary women authors are diverse, corresponding to temporal and geographical differences and reflecting the complexities both within and between Arab societies. However, many women authors' narratives, like

---

[33] Ashour, Berrada, Ghazoul and Rachid 1-2.
[34] Zaynab Fawwaz was born in South Lebanon. She later immigrated to Alexandria, where she became a writer concerned with the emancipation of Arab women.
[35] Mayy Ziyada was born in Nazareth to a Lebanese Maronite father and a Palestinian woman. She immigrated to Egypt. Ziyada wrote in both French and Arabic.
[36] al-'Id, 2008 16-17.
[37] Nawal El Saadawi was born in Kafr Tahla, Egypt. She earned a degree in medicine from Ayn Shams University and studied at Columbia University in New York. El Saadawi remains a prominent novelist, writer and activist today.

those explored in this dissertation, open new horizons for women's resistance against exploitive and manipulative apparatuses of rigid, patriarchal traditions in the Arab world and encourage the negotiation of new identities within the complex dynamics of gender and power relations. At the same time, however, these texts do not conceal the existence of submission, despair and failure along with their counterparts: resistance, hope and achievement.

In a literary environment dominated by men, along with their narratives and perspectives, the rise of contemporary Arab women's writing has begun to destabilize the master narratives of patriarchy and to make reference to issues of cultural constructions of sexuality, gender and violence as women authors add their voices to the conversation. Women's writing produces multiple perspectives of and responses to cultural and social forms of hegemony and subordination.

Lebanon, and Beirut in particular, has been a particularly important locus for the development of a modern female literary tradition, due in part to the concentration of Christian missionary schools in the region. Both Fawwaz and Ziyada were Lebanese, though Ziyada was born in Nazareth, and Fawwaz is responsible for one of the first works of prose fiction written by a woman in the modern period: *Husn al-'Awaqib* (1899, *Fine Consequences*). This was followed in 1904 by Labiba Hashim's[38] (1882-1952) *Qalb al-Rajul* (*A Man's Heart*), which is considered by some to be the first Arabic novel.[39] These efforts were supported early on in Lebanon by women's associations, such as the Women's Union formed in 1928, and were followed by a number of other

[38] Labiba Hashim is a well-known Lebanese novelist and writer. She was born in Beirut and immigrated to Cairo, where she established and edited the magazine *Fatat al-Sharq* from 1906-1935.
[39] *Zaynab* by Egyptian Muhammad Husayn Haykal, published in 1914, is most commonly referenced as the first Arabic novel. See al-'Id , 2008 36.

fiction works by women authors which treated women's issues as well as broader cultural, social and political concerns while reflecting their Lebanese context. However, they were largely didactic and do not reflect contemporary Arabic novelistic sensibilities.

Following World War I until the 1950s, Lebanese literary production in general suffered a decline and only a few novels were written by women during this period. One example is *Arwa Bint al-Khutub* (1949, *Arwa, Daughter of Woe*) by Widad Sakakini[40] (1913-1991), which can be characterized as belonging to the prior generation of fiction works.[41] The first contemporary novel by a woman made its appearance with the publication of Layla Ba'lbakki's[42] (b. 1934) *Ana Ahya* (*I Live*) in 1958. Roger Allen highlights the importance of this work, observing that "the very title presents a forceful statement, a challenge. The account of family relationships and feelings is no longer given within the framework of a distant, omniscient third-person narrative, but shifts to a direct first-person experiential montage" (Allen 104). The use of the first-person made this and later works particularly controversial as they explicitly granted their female narrators a voice. This was followed by Muna Jabbur's[43] (1943-1964) *Fatah Tafiha* (1962, *Silly Girl*) and *al-Ghirban wa al-Musuh al-Bayda'* (1966, *The Ravens and the White Gowns*) and Emily Nasrallah's[44] (b.1931) *Tuyur Aylul* (1962, *The Birds of September*), as well as several other works.[45]

---

[40] Widad Sakakini was born in Sidon, Lebanon. She wrote novels, short stories, articles and critical studies.
[41] al-'Id, 2008 22.
[42] Layla Ba'lbakki was born in al-Nabatiya, in southern Lebanon. She wrote novels and short stories and was also a journalist.
[43] Muna Jabbur was born in 'Akkar, Lebanon. After publishing two novels, one of which dealt with a young woman struggling with depression and a desire to end her life, Jabbur committed suicide at the age of 21.
[44] Emily Nasrallah was born in al-Kufayr in southern Lebanon. She is a novelist, journalist and scholar, and has won a number of awards for her fiction.
[45] al-'Id, 2008 24-27.

A major leap came with the outbreak of the Civil War and the development of what would come to be known as Lebanese Civil War Narratives, which represented a real revival in Lebanese literary production. Yumna al-‘Id observes that during this time period, “writers explored the contradiction and complexities of reality and its possible ramifications, and they worked on creating a multi-pronged discourse whose language expressed multiple viewpoints and nuances in diction, mindful of speech variations in a society that was becoming more sharply divided and on the verge of civil war” (al-‘Id, 2008 30). This was a process taking place across the Arab world, but its ramifications were felt in the Lebanese novel. Another important precedent was set by Syrian Colette Khuri[46] (b.1937), whose 1959 novel *Ayyam Ma‘ahu* (*Days with Him*) describes the sexual relationship between a young girl and her significantly older lover, paving the way for the more explicit narratives found in the three novels discussed in this dissertation.

There have been many important contributions by women authors to the field of Lebanese Civil War narratives. *Beirut ’75* by Ghada Samman, is a central text written on the eve of the outbreak of the Civil War, marking the starting point of the genre of Lebanese civil war fiction. Eerily prophetic, the novel traces the lives of its five main characters, who share a taxi traveling from Damascus to Beirut at the beginning of the narrative. Their lives continue to intersect through the book in interesting and complex ways as they come to discover that they are trapped and have little control over their own destinies. In the end, they are defeated by Beirut as they attempt to fulfill their dreams. Through her focus on the spirit of rebellion growing within a band of fishermen in the novel, referenced above, Samman indicates her hope that while these five characters are

[46] Colette Khuri was born in Damascus, Syria. She is a short-story writer and novelist and writes in French, Arabic and English.

unable to escape their fates, future generations may succeed in altering the forces within Lebanese society that hinder individual freedom, mobility and equality.

All of Samman's protagonists are victims in some sense, but her treatment of Yasmeen, the only female character in the novel, resonates in a particularly poignant way with the experiences of female characters treated in this dissertation. After being discarded by a wealthy boyfriend in his pursuit of a more profitable marriage, Yasmeen is no longer able to provide her brother with the money she had been paying him to ignore the perceived defilement of his honor caused by her having a relationship with a man outside of marriage. Her brother kills her, and his confession to a police man falls on sympathetic ears.

The theme of resistance to entrenched structures and the continued predominance of oppressive patriarchal traditions that lead to gendered violence against women are important elements shared with the novels under study in this dissertation. However, since the novel focuses on the lead-up to the war, and in fact was written before the actual outbreak of hostilities, it cannot enter into a conversation about the effects of the war on women's lives.

Beirut '75 (1975) is the first installment of a trilogy by Ghada Samman focused on different stages of the Lebanese Civil War. *Kawabis Beirut* (1976) (*Beirut Nightmares*) follows an unnamed female Lebanese protagonist caught for two week in the middle of a combat zone. The novel is composed of a series of nightmares, which can be divided into daily events that are transformed into surreal experiences because of the great lengths she and her three neighbors must go to adapt to their current condition and survive and real nightmares, in the style of those that end *Beirut '75*. It is here that

Samman introduces a plethora of characters that reveal the social and political problems underlying Lebanese society.

Beirut Nightmares focuses on many of the same issues that are explored in this dissertation. The protagonist stubbornly insists on recording her experiences and thoughts, finding release and meaning in her life through writing, much as Maryam and Alawiyya do in *Maryam of Stories*. Also, like Salaam in *Ya Salaam*, the protagonist of *Beirut Nightmares* is forced to challenge traditional gender roles in order to survive, becoming complicit in the masculine violence dominating war-torn Beirut by firing her gun at the ghost of her deceased boyfriend. However, in this liberation from traditional gender roles and the limits imposed by patriarchy, the protagonist finds hope in the future.

Despite its relevance to the texts discussed in this dissertation, *Beirut Nightmares* has been treated extensively in criticism on Lebanese Civil War fiction, particularly within scholarly works dealing with women writers, and so I do not feel that further treatment would be beneficial.[47]

The third book in the trilogy, *Laylat al-Milyar* (1986) (*The Night of the First Billion*), is also a critique of Lebanese society centered on the Civil War, but the majority of the novel is set outside of Lebanon, in a community of expatriates residing in Geneva. The main character, Khalil, flees Beirut during the 1982 Israeli invasion, but returns at the end of the novel, signaling once again Samman's hope in the future. Both because the majority of the narrative takes place outside of Lebanon and the main character is male, this novel is not particularly relevant to my current study.

---

[47] See Cooke, 1982 121-141 and Cooke, 1988.

Sitt Marie Rose (1978) by Etel Adnan is an important Lebanese Civil War narrative originally written in French, placing it outside the scope of this study even were it not for the already existing scholarly work on this novel.[48] The novel is based on the true story of Marie Rose Boulos, a Lebanese woman murdered by Phalangists for her involvement in and support of the Palestinian cause. The novel deals extensively with violence and resistance to patriarchal society through the adoption of non-traditional gender roles.

Barid Beirut (1996) (*Beirut Blues*) by Hanan al-Shaykh is a central contribution to the genre of Lebanese Civil War fiction. Interior monologues recalling both pre- and postwar Beirut supplement a series of letters written by the female protagonist, Asmahan, during the Civil War to a variety of recipients ranging from friends and family members, to Billie Holiday, the city of Beirut and the war itself. Through this fragmented narrative, Asmahan presents a picture of Lebanese society during the War.

The relevance of *Beirut Blues* to my current study is undeniable due to its treatment of questions of gender, sexuality and violence at the hands of a dynamic and powerful female protagonist. However, it fails to explore similar themes in markedly different ways from the texts treated in this dissertation. Furthermore, in the interest of diversity, I am reluctant to include more than one text by the same author, and Hanan al-Shaykh is already represented by *The Story of Zahra*. Finally, although *Beirut Blues* postdates the significant studies done by Evelyne Accad and Miriam Cooke on Lebanese Civil War narratives, and is not included in Cooke's extensive repertoire of texts treated

---

[48] See Majaj 200-230 and Foster 59-74.

under the rubric of women writers, significant scholarship has already been done on the text.[49]

* * *

My dissertation can be located more broadly within the body of scholarship that treats the Lebanese novel, its development and its stylistic features, such as critical texts by Elise Salem, Abdel Majid Zaraqit, Rafif Rida Sidawi and others. While my primary focus is the treatment of gender, sexuality and violence – discussions largely absent from these works – such a study can only succeed with ample attention to the structures and themes that contribute to our understanding of these concepts in Lebanese literature by women authors.

The secondary critical literature most germane to my dissertation and the literary works I will be investigating within it includes works by scholars who examine the representations of violence, gender and sexuality in select segments of Arabic literary production, such as Miriam Cooke and Evelyne Accad. These scholars, who are exposed to and utilize a wide range of Western critical theory and feminist perspectives, have emphasized the similarities or global nature of patriarchy and man's oppression of woman across cultures.

Elise Salem's *Constructing Lebanon: A Century of Literary Narratives* (2003) deals with the construction of Lebanese nationhood and identity as portrayed in the literary narratives published during the twentieth century. In addition to her discussion of the literary representations of Lebanese national identity and war, she devotes some sections to investigating the contributions of war narratives, especially those written by

[49] See, for example Adams 201-216 and Mehta 188-227.

women, to an understanding of Lebanese national identity by casting more light on the interconnections between sexuality, gender and violence. However, this area is not her focus and she does not treat the subject with the same sort of depth demonstrated in other studies and for which I will aim in this dissertation.

Among the literary studies that have dealt with the Lebanese novel as a whole, Abdel Majid Zaraqit's *Fi Bina' al-Riwayah al-Lubnaniyah (1972-1992)* (1999) (*The Structure of the Lebanese Novel: 1972-1992*) is an excellent source. As the title suggests, the major focus of this study is the narrative techniques, time and spatial dimensions, and various modes of characterization utilized in the Lebanese novel. Despite its constructive discussion of the wide variety of experimentation with narrative techniques, this study rarely delves into the social, cultural and political significances of the studied novels.

Rafif Rida Sidawi's *al-Nadhra al-Riwa'iyah ila al-Harb al-Lubnaniyah* (2003) (*A Novelistic Perspective of the Lebanese Civil War*) adopts a sociological perspective, benefiting mainly from the theoretical achievements of Lucien Goldmann, Wilhelm Dilthey, and Max Weber, in analyzing the interconnections between war, sociopolitical structures, cultural formations, and national, religious, and ethnic conflicts. A study of the indispensable roles that sexuality, gender, and oppression play in fashioning these political and psychological conflicts is outside the scope of her study. My dissertation will broaden the scope of Sidawi's analysis of sociopolitical conflicts by fleshing out their connections to fictional characters' internalizations of socially assigned gender roles and values, violent events, and patriarchal structures and the modes through which these internalizations are projected once again on the outer world—underscoring the convergence of political, social, and personal conflicts and traumas.

Miriam Cooke's *War's Other Voices: Women Writers on the Lebanese Civil War* (1988) offers a discussion of how the writings of women about the Lebanese Civil War are distinct from those of their male counterparts. Cooke highlights the rise of women's literary output during the War, identifying a group of women she calls the "Beirut Decentrists" because they were decentered in two ways: "physically, they were scattered all over a self-destructing city; intellectually, they moved in separate spheres" (Cooke, 1988 3). Despite this lack of connection between them and the fact that they came from nearly every confessional and political group, Cooke asserts that they shared many features. Most importantly, while men wrote about "strategy, ideology and violence", attempting to formulate a big picture of the War, women wrote about "the dailiness of war," coming to an understanding of their experiences through close examination of the reality they knew best. In this way, women were able to give voice to their own, distinct experiences and write them into history.

War's Other Voices is without a doubt an important and foundational text in the relatively new field of Lebanese Civil War literary criticism. Cooke can largely be credited with drawing attention to women authors who were previously suppressed in favor of their male contemporaries. She did much to remove the stigma attached to Arab women authors, whose work was often considered amateurish or unprofessional since it did not adhere to dominant, masculine forms.

However, Cooke published her study in 1987, shortly before the war had ended.[50] So while her text highlights the experience of women writing shortly before and during

[50] Cooke's later book, *Women and the War Story* (1996), is a study of postcolonial war narratives written by women in the Arab world. In this text, Cooke expands her argument of the focus by women writers on the "dailiness" of war, as both a subversive, oppositional movement and an assertion of agency, beyond Lebanon. In her discussion of Lebanon, however, Cooke includes many of the women writers she

the war, both *Ya Salaam* and *Maryam of Stories* represent much later examples of this genre, as they were published over a decade after the appearance of Cooke's study and the end of the war. Because they benefit from the passage of time and distance from the emotionally charged events of the War, these two novels bring a new perspective to the genre. They reveal new attitudes about the War that, while they lack the immediacy of the narratives studied by Cooke, are no less relevant to our understanding of the genre and the experience of war itself. These texts are therefore in desperate need of study and analytical attention.

For example, *Ya Salaam* displays an unprecedented intensity of violence, both during and in the aftermath of the war, that is incredibly informative of later attitudes about that period of Lebanese history. Furthermore, it expresses a deep hopelessness in the war generation and its future that could only develop later, when the long-term effects of growing up during war could be known. *Maryam of Stories* also treats the aftermath of the war in a holistic way, benefiting from the distance its later publication affords it by tracing the relatively long-term effects of the period of hostilities itself as well as exploring the environment created by their cessation.

Additionally, closer examination of later texts written by male authors reveals that they too were concerned with the "dailiness" of war. One example is the novels of Rashid al-Daif. Another is *Binayat Mathilde* (1983) (The House of Mathilde) by Hassan Daoud[51], which traces the lives of the Christian and Muslim inhabitants of an apartment building in Beirut during the Civil War. Through its focus on the daily events of life, such as births, deaths and marriages, Daoud challenges Cooke's dichotomy of male

---

discusses in *War's Other Voices* and the new authors she incorporates did not write any later than the early 1990s.

[51] Hassan Daoud was born in Southern Lebanon in 1950.

writers who write about ideology and the grand ideas of wars, and women writers who approach larger issues through a focus on “dailiness”. The appearance of violence in this setting accurately captures its disruptive and shocking quality, even in times of war.

Evelyne Accad’s *Sexuality and War: Literary Masks of the Middle East* (1990) draws connections between sexuality, gender and violence in contemporary Arabic fiction, stating that issues of sexuality and domination are best understood as manifestations of socially and culturally assigned gender roles in a patriarchal society like the Middle East.[52] Highlighting the differences in the ways male writers perceive and write about the connection between sexuality and war from those of female writers is a recurring theme throughout the book. According to Accad, female protagonists in novels written by women realize that their oppression is strongly tied to their sexuality and gender roles and tend to seek alternatives in nonviolent personal and social engagements, whereas male writers and protagonists continue to reinforce the patriarchal order and practice acts of revenge and violence.

My study endeavors to further her argument by discussing the interconnections between gender, sexuality and violence in novels published after her book, and also to present other works of fiction which challenge her essentialist approach regarding categories of women and men as they relate to violence and gender roles. The fictional works that my dissertation will explore reveal that violent and nonviolent acts are shaped performatively, affirming hybridity and fluidity not only between gender, ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic differences, but also within each one of these categories.

[52] In a strikingly similar book chapter, “Gender and Violence in Lebanese War Novels” (2007), Accad again seeks to demonstrate the link between war and sexuality, using literature as a lens and again returning to the same six novels. See Accad, 2007 293-310.

The material under study in my dissertation is also, again with the exception of *The Story of Zahra*, quite different from the texts treated by Accad, with the natural result that it uncovers elements missing in her selections that complicate the categories she creates. Accad chooses novels written in both Arabic and French, while all three of the novels I discuss were written in Arabic. More important, perhaps, is the difference of what has been included. While Accad identifies in her introduction the inclusion of works available in translation to the Western reader as one of her criteria for selection, neither *Maryam of Stories* nor *Ya Salaam* has been published in English translation, with the result that they have received virtually no attention in English scholarship.[53]

All of the secondary scholarship on Lebanese literature discussed above has been important in shaping the study of the genre, shedding light on its distinct qualities and unique contributions.[54] Cooke and Accad represent unique voices that have both brought necessary attention to Lebanese women writers, particularly those contributing to the growing body of Lebanese Civil War literature, and identified many of the themes, tropes and approaches that connect these texts. My dissertation will fill a significant gap in the aforementioned scholarship, however, by including more recent publications and focusing on their unique concerns and then using this framework to expand prior treatments of *The Story of Zahra* to give the incredibly complex characters the attention they deserve.

---

[53] See Maher Jarrar's brief and somewhat hasty treatment of *Maryam al-Hakaya* in "Sexuality, Fantasy and Violence in Lebanon's Postwar Novel" (2006).
For a brief discussion of *Ya Salaam* see Shaaban 169-171.

[54] Another text worthy of note is R. Allen, H. Kilpatrick and E. de Moor's edited volume *Love and Sexuality in Modern Arabic Fiction* (1995), which focuses on themes of love, sexuality and oppression as portrayed in various publications of prose and poetry in the twentieth century. The volume's essays further an understanding of the multiple literary representations of sexuality in modern Arab culture. Despite their invaluable insights, however, the essays do not exhibit a detailed account of the interrelationships between love, sexuality, gender, domination and violence. In addition, this anthology as a whole does not provide a unified analysis of these chief tropes.

* * *

In this dissertation, I repeatedly employ the same terms and feel it is important to define what is meant by each of them. The key terms that bind this dissertation together are gender, sexuality and violence.

In *Gender* (2002), R.W. Connell criticizes the common understanding of gender as “the cultural difference of women from men, based on the biological difference between male and female” (Connell, 2002 9). The focus here is on difference. Connell argues that such a dichotomy does not reflect the complexity of reality and is therefore untenable. Gender cannot be so simply divided into the binary of male and female, or masculine and feminine, as a reductionist understanding such as this does not allow for the differences among women and men, including but not limited to homosexuality versus heterosexuality and the practice of hegemonic versus non-hegemonic masculinities. Nor does it adequately account for similarities between women and men.

In this dissertation, I will adopt Connell’s notion of gender, which advocates its reconceptualization as a social structure, the result of processes that occur in the “reproductive arena”. Connell informally defines gender as “the way human society deals with human bodies and their continuity, and the many consequences of that ‘dealing’ in our personal lives and our collective fate” (Connell, 2002 11).

Under this definition, I will also ascribe a number of qualities to gender. 1. Gender is multidimensional and fluid. 2. Gender is not innate; rather, it is negotiated in a series of processes that begin in childhood and continue throughout one’s life. 3. An

individual's sense of gender influences the ways in which he or she interacts with society and its structures.

Sexuality is of course intimately related to gender, as both deal with the body. Freud approached sexuality as "divorced from its too close connection with the genitals," viewing it instead as "a more comprehensive bodily function, having pleasure as its goal and only secondarily coming to serve the ends of reproduction" (Freud, 1989, Autobiographical 23). Deborah Cameron and Don Kulick broaden this understanding, defining sexuality in *Language and Sexuality* simply as "having certain types of erotic desires" (Cameron and Kulick, 5). They further assert that sexuality is constructed, making it, like gender, the product of social structures and lived experiences.

Adopting Cameron and Kulick's conception of sexuality, I further add Connell and Gary W. Dowsett's observation that "sexuality involves relations of power within genders as well as between them" (Connell and Dowsett 187). Sexuality can best be understood as a social practice, and is not just constructed by society. Connell and Dowsett also assert that "society is constructed sexually" (Connell and Dowsett 188). Whereas gender is primarily a structure negotiated through practices and processes, sexuality is primarily a system of practices, informed by social structures and processes but also powerful enough to influence those structures and processes.

Violence takes many different forms in the three novels, but all of them, I argue, are closely related to gender and sexuality as it is also practiced on the body. In *On Violence*, Hannah Arendt famously argues that "power and violence are opposites; where the one rules absolutely, the other is absent" (Arendt 11). In other words, violence is always an attempt to consolidate power and respond to threats that undermine its absolute

control. It is never an assertion of the unquestioned presence of power, because true power does not need violence to ensure its continued functioning. In this sense, as demonstrated in these three novels, power relations are at the root of gendered violence and violent expressions of sexuality. Violence perpetrated by men on both men and women is most often an attempt to assert a masculinity that values domination and patriarchal structures. Violence practiced by women against men is an attempt to resist these structures of oppression. Finally, violence practiced by women against women is most often an attempt to support prevalent conceptions of gender and sexuality that privilege men.

I have identified three forms of violence in the treated works. I will utilize Johan Galtung's categories to characterize them. The first is direct violence. This form of violence is physical, and its means of expression are only limited by the characters' imagination. The second form is structural violence, which is nonphysical and involves exploitation and oppression, especially of women. The third and final form of violence, also nonphysical, is what Galtung refers to as 'cultural violence,' by which he means "those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence – exemplified by religion and ideology, language and art, empirical science and formal science (logic, mathematics) – that can be used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence" (Galtung 39). These three forms are of course interconnected, and find multiple, overlapping ways of expression in *The Story of Zahra*, *Ya Salaam*, and *Maryam of Stories*.

* * *

Since the 1970s, many Lebanese women writers have begun to consider cultural conceptions and social constructions of gender, sexuality and violence in their fiction. In order to comprehend the roots and expressions of gendered violence and the social/cultural construction and negotiation of sexuality and gender identities, I will utilize the methodological and conceptual tools of psychoanalysis, gender studies and feminist criticism in my dissertation.

Psychoanalysis and literary studies overlap and interact effectively in their engagement with the multiple dimensions of the human experience. In my dissertation, I will utilize various psychoanalytic theories that have produced indispensable knowledge of the conditions of human subjectivity and sexuality, the conscious and the unconscious, desire and fantasy, gender positions and identifications, and aggression and repression. I highlight the connections between the cultural, social and political milieu and processes of genderization and self-constitution, constructions of psychic interiority, and eroticization of power in the novels.

Freudian theories on the development of sexuality, female sexuality, the Oedipus complex, desire, pleasure and the phallus, among others, will be discussed and interrogated when dealing with narratives that deal with psychosexual development and identity formation of female and male characters. For example, I utilize Freud in my treatment of Zahra's psychosexual development in *The Story of Zahra*. I also employ the work of psychoanalysts in the Freudian tradition, such as Jane Flax.

My discussions of psychoanalysis also benefit from the work of Jacques Lacan, Carl Jung, and other psychoanalysts who build on his work, such as Esther Harding. Finally, I employ Gilles Deleuze as well in my treatment of sadomasochism.

Complex and dynamic, feminist literary theory and criticism are disciplines of study whose chief undertaking is the uncovering of the inadequacy of traditional literary methods and schools and the meaningful analysis of the textual implications of gender relations through the provision of alternative modes of interpretation that account for the sexual politics in literature. Since the 1960s, feminist literary criticism in the West has gone through several stages of change and development, beginning with the deconstruction of literary images of women in fiction written by men, moving to the advancement of a feminist or female aesthetics of literary production, then drawing attention to the processes of gender negotiation in all literature, and finally transcending the category of gender to investigate the equally crucial factors of race, ethnicity, class, religion and socioeconomic status in the production of textual meaning.

The fundamental approaches through which Western feminist literary theory and criticism have developed over the past thirty years or so will be crucial to my study, helping to illuminate the interrelations between sexual identity politics, gender arrangements, patriarchal structures and violence. I use the work of a number of different feminist scholars in all three chapters including that of Annie Potts, Joanne S. Frye, Patrocinio P. Schweickart, Hélène Cixous, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Luce Irigaray, and Camille Paglia, among others.

Taking into account the fact that Western feminist theories can not always be applied to other contexts, in this case, Lebanese literary production, my project will approach the literary works as the source of theoretical elucidation and will explore the applicability of the diverse methodologies of Western feminist theory and criticism. It is worth noting that Arabic literature concerned with feminist matters does not present a

linear development through stages resembling the major ones that took place in the West, outlined above. The same can be said about feminist literary criticism of these literary works. This is perhaps because some critical approaches skip ahead to the most recent development in Western critical theory. In other cases, hesitation to apply Western literary discourses is motivated by a dislike for the imperialism many feel that they embody.

In my discussions on gender and sexuality in this dissertation, I am greatly indebted to the field of gender studies. As outlined above, I rest much of my understanding of the complex processes of gender and sexuality on the work of R.W. Connell, while also benefiting from the scholarship of Michael S. Kimmel, Lawrence Kramer and Laura Mulvey, among others.

Despite my indebtedness to psychoanalysis, gender studies, literary theory and criticism, however, the framework of this dissertation remains thematic rather than theoretical. Given the complex and contradictory understandings of gender, sexuality and violence, as well as their enactment and interrelation, the use of a single framework would have been unnatural and stifling. I have instead relied on a number of goals and shared themes, discussed above, to bind this dissertation together.

The overarching goal of my dissertation is to provide a more profound understanding of the processes and mechanisms through which the multiple forms, meanings and metaphors of violence, gender and sexuality are negotiated. In this sense, one recurring purpose of my project is to examine the ways in which the various and often conflicting theories that originated in Western academic circles about these concepts can be appropriated, furthered or challenged when applied to contemporary

Lebanese war narratives by women writers. Despite the significant discussion of the social construction of gender identity and sexuality in academic circles in the West, these matters are relatively understudied in non-western literatures, including Arabic fiction.

My second goal in this dissertation is to trace character development, revealing how characters, both male and female, negotiate their genders and sexualities in prewar, war and postwar societies. Finally, I aim in all three chapters to locate a site of hope and healing within the seemingly inescapable cycle of violence and oppression presented in the novels.

* * *

My dissertation is divided into five chapters: an introduction, a conclusion and three chapters dealing with the novels. Chapter Two treats al-Shaykh's *The Story of Zahra*[55], which relates the short life of Zahra, a Shi'a from the South living in Beirut, tracing her development before and during the Lebanese Civil War. The novel is divided into two parts. The first exhibits the main chapters of Zahra's life before the outbreak of the Civil War and introduces other important characters that affected the development of her personality. These are her parents, her brother Ahmad, her mother's lover, her uncle Hashem, her husband Majed, and her lover Malek, who is a married man and a friend of her family. The second part gives details of Zahra's life during the war, mainly focusing on her troubled relationship with Sami, the sniper. The fragmented style of the text

[55] All references to *The Story of Zahra* in this dissertation refer to Peter Ford's English translation (1995) unless otherwise indicated.

mirrors the chaos of the Civil War, a stylistic feature that has been noted by many critics.[56]

In my analysis, I will place greater emphasis on the first part of the novel, for two reasons. First, this section of the novel treats Zahra's psychosexual development, exploring the patriarchal patterns of violence and aggression that shaped the construction of her gender and sexuality, making it of vital importance in understanding her later rebellion against these forces. Second, while scholarship has dealt extensively with *The Story of Zahra*, the first half of the novel is almost always completely ignored in these works, and I believe that foregrounding it will complicate our understanding of the inherent violence of Lebanese social structures that were displaced or altered by the war. I will focus on the effects of the war on Zahra and Lebanese society and social patterns in my discussion of the second half of the novel.

In section one of this chapter, I use a Freudian psychoanalytical framework, supplemented by contemporary feminist and gender criticism that problematizes and expands Freud's work, to demonstrate that Zahra's development is shaped by her early relationship with her mother. By impeding her daughter's move towards autonomy while at the same time denying her the nurturing closeness that Zahra desired, the mother instilled in Zahra a deep lack of self-confidence and an extremely complicated desire to both reunite with the mother and reject her. At the same time, the mother functioned as

[56] See, for example, Ghandour: "The discourse of the novel in general has developed from a well-structured and delineated narrative – a clear beginning, middle, and end – to a fragmentary but more sophisticated one. In Lebanon, this change in discursive practice can be linked to the disintegration of the social structure of the state. With the collapse of civil society and the emergence of various political power entities, and hence the disappearance of a singular truth, writers have come to experience not only a frustration with the political structure and its mechanism operating in the state, but also a disbelief and doubt in everything that goes on around them, even a disbelief in their own identity and subjectivity" (Ghandour 232-233).

an agent of patriarchy, instilling its values in and imposing its norms on Zahra. In this way, Zahra's sexuality, sense of gender and self-image were formed.

In the next section of this chapter, I demonstrate that Zahra's later relationships with men enforced the patriarchal patterns of oppression and subjugation nourished by her mother. It becomes clear that Zahra was unable to resist the exploitation and violence practiced on her by the men in her life because of the submissiveness that she internalized from her mother.

In section three, I examine the relationship between gender, class, race, politics and nationalism, discussing the impact of these forces on male conceptualizations of Zahra as well as on the formation of male sexuality and the production of male gender themselves. Here, I show that even though Zahra suffers most directly under the forces of patriarchy, men are victims of its oppression as well.

In the final section dealing with the first half of the novel, I discuss the theme of madness in *The Story of Zahra*, juxtaposing Zahra with the character of Bertha Mason in both *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* to highlight the ways in which madness, in the sense of mental illness, is a symptom of childhood trauma while female madness, as a trope, can be understood as a productive means of gendered rebellion against patriarchy, undoing its inherent contradictions.

In the first section dealing with the second half of the novel, I focus on Zahra's rebellion during the Civil War against her father and mother as well as against the patriarchal forces that have sought to control her all of her life. It is in this context that she is able to truly separate from her mother and individuate, reconstructing her sexuality and sense of gender. Unfortunately, however, Zahra's liberation from patriarchal patterns

of oppression relies on the war itself, revealing the instability of her freedom and her inability to effect lasting change within her own life or within Lebanese society.

In the second section dealing with the second half of the novel, I discuss the impact of the Civil War on masculine and patriarchal forces of oppression, indicating once again that while men, like women, may undergo certain changes during the war, none of these lead to permanent alterations in societal structures. In *The Story of Zahra*, masculinity is either weakened by the war or strengthened through the increased availability of new outlets for violence and subjugation. I utilize the concept of the male gaze to highlight these different responses.

In the final section, I explore three possible readings of the novel's ending, ultimately highlighting the circularity of the novel's plot as Zahra is destroyed by the same patriarchal forces that shape her development at the beginning of the novel, revealing the cyclical nature of these patterns of oppression. I locate a site of hope, however, in Zahra's narration of her own death. This demonstrates her attainment of a voice that will live on even after her body is gone.

In Chapter Three of this dissertation, I discuss Najwa Barakat's *Ya Salaam*. This novel paints a grim picture of a society crushed by a civil war that not only disrupted social orders and demolished societal infrastructures, but also cultivated among the population an atmosphere of violence and aggression that has remained prevalent for many years, even after the official end of the Civil War in 1990. The novel holds an important place among Lebanese Civil War narratives as it confronts the reader, probably more than any other Lebanese war novel, with an unusual, riotous, anarchic, dreadful

world—full of graphic descriptions of terror, raw violence, and brutal scenes of sexual torture.

The intensity of violence in this novel can be seen as the culmination of war itself, bolstered by traditional patriarchal patterns that empower men and predate the war. In the first section of this chapter, I also argue, however, that the novel presents violence, and particularly male aggression, as ahistorical to a certain extent. These patterns of violence were nurtured by patriarchal structures, intensified during the war with the decline of social controls and resisted a return to prewar levels in postwar Beirut by finding more creative ways of expression. The roots of this violence, though, can be found in the primitive, natural state to which the city of Beirut reverted when societal and civilizational controls were weakened, or in some cases disappeared altogether, during the Civil War.

In the second section of this chapter, I explore the reasons for violence in the novel. On a personal level, violence functions for the characters as a way to consolidate power and also to preserve identity and sense of self from assimilation or annihilation. On an authorial level, Barakat utilizes violence to send a more profound political message about the destructiveness and futility of the Civil War in particular and violence in general. Finally, on a religious or spiritual level, violence takes on a sacred role as it is used by divine forces to permanently halt human violence.

In the fourth chapter, I discuss Alawiyya Subuh's *Maryam of Stories*. This novel considers the multifaceted interactions of Lebanese women belonging to three successive generations, shedding light on the social, cultural, and political changes that contemporary Lebanese society has undergone since the French colonial period (1919-

1943). As the title suggests, this novel, rather than presenting a unified narrative with a single voice and perspective, is a collection of interwoven stories of women's struggle. In various ways, the diverse narrative threads repeat the same story of failed attempts at emancipation from entrenched social practices and cultural conventions as well as patterns of violence, including but not limited to the political disputes that befell war-torn Beirut. The many stories told about different women from distinct perspectives are interconnected and can be read as a unified whole, articulating the continuous patterns of women's subjugation across time and space.

The fifteen-year civil war had a unique impact on Lebanese society in multiple domains, as demonstrated in *Maryam of Stories*. These years of constant disruption and turmoil brought about profound changes, engendering a highly complex re-structuring of society and leaving a lasting mark on women's lives. However, as the novel traces its way through three generations, it becomes clear that the same cultural restrictions of patriarchal structures and the social constraints of strict barriers drawn on the basis of gender continued to impact women's lives, displaying an astonishing temporal and spatial mobility across the past, present and future as well as between the village and the city. This novel can be read as an elegy for women's unfulfilled social and political ambitions on the national level and unsatisfied emotional and sexual desires on a personal level. The older generation of these women, denied education and power, were regarded as inferior to men and were confined to their domestic spheres. They existed relationally for the most part, their existence fully recognized in relation to their social roles as wives, mothers, sisters and daughters, rendering them economically, socially and ontologically dependent on men.

The novel also provides a unique insight into how the younger generation, represented in the characters of Alawiyya, Maryam, Yasmeen and Ibtisam, lived through the war and post-war turmoil, re-negotiated their subjectivities, and yet failed to escape traditional gender roles and limitations. It is Maryam who relates the frame story of Maryam of Stories, describing her search for the character-author, Alawiyya Subuh (who shares her name with the novel's author), who had promised to set down Maryam's stories, as well as those that she kept for other women. Alawiyya the character-author has disappeared, however, and the narrator has made the decision, in the wake of the Civil War, to leave Lebanon, immigrate to Canada and marry.

The text reveals that women's growing involvement in cultural and literary production is an integral component of contemporary experience and urbanization and in the first section of this chapter, I argue that the novel's fundamental concern with women's writing can be understood from three primary perspectives. First, storytelling in general and the act of writing in particular provide a necessary release and represent a way of negotiating reality and organizing daily events.

Second, women's writing against the grain of patriarchal structures and their reconceptualizations of categories like subjectivity, gender and sexuality destabilize the masculine center by offering new accounts of their own lives. From this angle, this chapter examines the various ways in which women's urban experiences manipulate and invade the masculine sphere to create a meaningful positioning within urban society in which they can write their own stories.

From the third perspective, I argue that *Maryam of Stories* is a feminine text. It therefore opens the door for a unique writer-text-reader relationship that helps to create a

community of women based on affiliation. Such a community possesses much greater power to affect change in patriarchal society than any individual author or reader on their own. It is therefore from within this triad that we can identify the possibility for sustained change within society.

In the second section of this chapter, I argue that sex can be an act of rebellion, but its effect is temporary as it only succeeds in resisting patriarchal structures in the moment. However, by writing about sex in particular, women finally find a path to lasting liberation from traditional patriarchal structures and social norms. This is achieved by re-claiming patterns of exploitation and asserting their own subjectivity through their narration.

In the third and final section of this chapter, I contrast the city with the rural south, arguing that the novel exposes two competing subjectivities. The first is a traditional subjectivity, embodied by the rural south, that values family structure and the father figure and functions as a foundation for gender inequality and oppression and repression of female sexuality. It represents a past that is threatened by an emerging second subjectivity, which is cultivated by urban experiences that highlight individual freedom and self-recognition. This second subjectivity, however, despite the superficial picture it paints of liberation from traditional norms and patriarchal values, reveals the same patterns of oppression that structured the rural experience of Maryam's parents' generation. The difference is that these forces are more subtle and force a return to patriarchal structures later in life after women have already been given a taste of liberation and freedom.

Within this context, this chapter explores the various modes in which women internalize cultural and social beliefs and gender identity and how this process helps perpetuate the patriarchal structure. However, I also investigate the different ways in which women, in both a rural and an urban context, resist the patriarchal system.

Chapter Two

Never at Peace, Always in Conflict: The Formation and Re-Formulation of Gender in Hanan al-Shaykh's *The Story of Zahra*

I. Introduction

The Story of Zahra narrates the tale of Zahra's short life and tragic death. The first half of the novel traces Zahra's tumultuous psychological development as she grows up, moves to Africa, marries, divorces and then returns once again to Beirut. Throughout this chapter, Zahra is shown to suffer multiple forms of oppression and exploitation, primarily at the hands of men, but also, significantly, by her mother. In the second section of the novel, Zahra becomes empowered by the new freedom granted her by the chaos of the Lebanese Civil War. She challenges traditional, patriarchy-inscribed gender roles and becomes comfortable enough with herself and her sexuality to have an orgasm for the first time with Sami, her lover, the sniper who controls the street from a nearby building. While Zahra succeeds in temporarily defying cultural norms and ingrained social structures, she is unable to effect lasting change and is ultimately destroyed when Sami shoots her after she confesses to him that she is pregnant with his child and wishes to marry.

The first half of the novel consists of a series of inner monologues from the perspectives of Zahra, her uncle Hashem and her husband Majed. In this section, Zahra is still sharing her story and its presentation with others. Because of the series of flashbacks that tie Zahra's present to her past, the narrative can be said to be circular,

rather than linear. In the second half of *The Story of Zahra*, Zahra completely takes over the narrative, which becomes increasingly fragmented as the chaos of the war penetrates her perception of events.

Throughout this chapter, I will make use of Peter Ford's English translation of *The Story of Zahra*, "rendered […] with the author's cooperation", whenever possible (al-Shaykh, 1995). It is important to note, however, that reference solely to the English translation will provide a much different understanding of the novel than that developed through a reading of the Arabic original, as the English translation has been significantly edited and altered. It is a different novel in many ways.[57] I will explore some of the particularities of this assertion throughout the text in my references to the Arabic original.

II. *The Story of Zahra* – Part I

The Orange and Its Navel: Zahra and Her Mother, and Zahra's Early Psychosexual Development

Zahra's life is marked by a series of traumatic experiences that shape her development. Although the narrative of *The Story of Zahra* is circular, rather than linear, particularly in the first half of the novel, flashbacks reveal the disturbances she experienced as a child. The earliest of these involve her witnessing of and unwilling complicity in her mother's extramarital affair.

The novel begins with Zahra's first memory of her mother's infidelity. She tells both Zahra and her husband that she is taking Zahra to the doctor to receive calcium injections. When Zahra questions the reason for this, her mother responds: "Isn't it

[57] In *The Arabic Novel: An Historical and Critical Introduction* (1995), Roger Allen concurs, asserting that Peter Ford's translation "must be considered a heavily abridged version of the original text. It differs from the original in quite significant (and unfortunate) ways" (Allen 231).

enough that I have sold my gold bracelets to buy you your calcium injections? Don't you see how bow-legged you are?" (al-Shaykh, 1995 4). Here we see that Zahra is first made self-conscious of her physical shortcomings, planting the seeds for a severely negative self-image that will help shape her future interactions with men, and then made to feel guilty because of them, allowing her mother to displace her own wrongdoing and feelings of guilt onto her daughter.

In the opening scene of the novel, Zahra and her mother, visiting her mother's lover, hide in a dark room to escape detection. The mother presses her hand onto her daughter's mouth to keep her from revealing their hiding place. As we see from this initial scene of subjugation, the mother's primary goal is to control her daughter's voice. Zahra gladly submits to her mother's act of silencing, cherishing the physical closeness that her mother's lover has already begun to interrupt: "her hand smelled of soap and onions. I wished she would keep it there forever" (al-Shaykh, 1995 3).

In this scene, Zahra is submissively silent. However, her act of remembering this moment reveals the resentment associated with and scarring psychological impact of this early experience, combined with the desperate desire to be physically near to her mother, even if the context is developmentally limiting. Such scenes of Zahra's repression and prohibition, as well as her irreparable emotional scarring, occur frequently as the narration progresses.

In this symbolic context, as I hope to show, the mother internalizes the patriarchal system and becomes its devoted representative, participating in an elaborate network of repression. Starved for her mother's attention, Zahra willingly submits. Ghandour observes that:

> the discourses by which Zahra's immediate and extended family construct her, along with the social discourses […] are basically discourses that constrain and contradict her as an evolving human being. These discourses construct her, instead, as a speechless entity (Ghandour 239).

Of the first remembered meeting with her mother's lover, Zahra recalls little more of the actual details. However, it is from this point on that Zahra begins to feel increasingly threatened and neglected by her mother. This results in the emergence of an ambivalent attitude toward her mother. She feels divided between her need to maintain a comforting closeness with her mother and a growing hatred for her that makes her want to push her away. This stems from her conflicting desires to be nurtured by her mother and individuate and separate from her at the same time.

As Jane Flax explains in "The Conflict between Nurturance and Autonomy in Mother-Daughter Relationships and within Feminism" (1978), a daughter's difficulty in separating from the mother is often the result of the mother's inadequate nurturing of her daughter as a child.[58] Additionally, in a patriarchal society with traditional gender roles, "because she [the daughter] is expected to be like the mother, both as a person and in terms of her adult roles, there is less need for her to differentiate" (Flax 175-176).

The presence of the man is viewed as a threatening force that seeks to separate Zahra from her mother before she is ready for this step: "the distance between me and my mother grows greater, deeper, although we have been as close as an orange and its navel" (al-Shaykh, 1995 8). She has two conflicting reactions to this process, as described above. On the one hand, Zahra's perceived distancing from her mother causes

[58] Flax explains that: "Many therapists agree that the most important tasks of the first three years of human life are, first, establishing a close relationship with a caretaker--usually the mother--and, second, moving from that relationship through the process of separation and individuation. Separation means establishing a firm sense of differentiation from the mother, of possessing one's own physical and mental boundaries. Individuation means the development of a range of characteristics, skills and personality traits which are uniquely one's own. Separation and individuation are the two "tracks" of development; they are not identical but they can rein-force or impede each other" (Flax 172).

her to crave an even more intense closeness.[59] At the same time, however, Zahra harbors feelings of anger towards her mother.[60]

Zahra is unable to accurately identify these feelings of anger and betrayal, even as she looks back at them from the perspective of adulthood.[61] However, as discussed above, we can hypothesize that Zahra's emotions are the result of a process of separation and individuation brought on without the proper degree of prior nurturing. As Flax succinctly explains, "the child both wants to return to the symbiotic state and fears being reengulfed by it" (Flax 177).

The image of the navel and the orange, referred to repeatedly through the text, describes the bond of closeness between Zahra and her mother.[62] Evelyne Accad remarks that it is "a sensual, organic image that recurs as a leitmotif throughout the novel. It is a symbol of her feeling as if she were the center of the earth or back in the womb, a symbol of warmth and of life" (Accad 45). A better understanding of the anatomy of the navel orange will aid us in our explication of such an unusual image.

A navel orange is recognizable by the presence of what appears to be a navel on the outer end of the orange, extending into its interior. This "navel" is actually the result of a mutation that "created a conjoined twin — an aborted second orange at the opposite end from the stem" ("Who Put the Navel in Navel Oranges?"). While the orange and the navel are so close as to be inseparable, then, it is interesting to note that the flourishing of

---

[59] "I wanted to disappear into the hem of her dress and become even closer to her than the navel is to the orange" (al-Shaykh, 1995 8).

[60] "But whenever I began to think in this way, I felt a bitterness towards her and shuddered. I carried this pain and hatred inside me whenever I disobeyed her and felt rejected, neglected by her" (al-Shaykh, 1995 8).

[61] "Even today I still ask myself what was the nature of this feeling. Was it jealousy? Was it pity for my father? Or was it the fear that took hold of me every time I accompanied her on one of her assignations with the man" (al-Shaykh, 1995 9).

[62] See al-Shaykh, 1995 5, 11, 116-117.

the orange can only occur if the development of its conjoined twin is stunted. While Accad, then, encourages us to read the image of orange as womb and the navel as fetus, it is notable that the closeness of this natural relationship, rather than benefiting the navel, as is the case in the orange as womb metaphor, actually restricts the development of the navel into a distinct orange, much as Zahra's own development is curtailed by her mother's sexual flourishing.

Furthermore, all navel oranges are clones of an original mutation that occurred in the 19th century in Brazil. Since they are seedless, navel oranges can only reproduce through a process of grafting, never naturally. This piece of information can further inform our understanding of the metaphor of orange and its navel, if we understand the orange as a restrictive vessel for the transference of patriarchy (Zahra's mother), curtailing the navel's (Zahra's) development. Like the process of grafting that must occur to produce a navel orange, patriarchal structures, which are never natural but rather must be constantly re-expressed and reinforced, are forcefully reproduced by the mother, creating a relationship ensures the restriction of the daughter's development.

The image of orange and its navel also marks the beginning of Zahra's psychosexual development. Within a larger Freudian context and specifically within an oedipal framework,[63] the orange and the navel seem to represent Zahra's pre-oedipal

---

[63] Despite the fact that Freudian psychoanalysis as an analytical tool has been the subject of scholarly, especially feminist, criticism, I can't help but find it useful in analyzing the development of Zahra's personality. I am aware that Freud's theoretical accounts, especially those addressing women and their development, are seen by many feminist thinkers and scholars as problematic and essentialist in the sense that they are thought from a patriarchal perspective that privileges men and male-domination. The first critics of Freud's views on women appeared in the 1960s and 1970s. See, for example, Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970), Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970), and Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (1970).

However, also in the 1970s, Juliet Mitchell highlighted positively in *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974) the descriptive aspect of Freudian theories of the Oedipus complex, focusing on Freud's analyses of

attachment to her mother who is identified as Zahra's first love-object. According to Charles Brenner, in psychoanalysis, "the term 'object' is used to designate persons or things of the external environment which are psychologically significant to one's psychic life, whether such things be animate or lifeless" (Brenner 98). Freud asserts that the mother is the first love-object for both sexes.[64]

What complicates the Freudian concept of the oedipal complex here is the presence of two men in the conflict – the mother's lover and Zahra's father. However, there are several textual indications that signal that Zahra's mother's lover is also playing the role of the father, completing the oedipal triangle. The link between them is made apparent in one of Zahra's earliest memories of the lover: "now he was standing facing us, holding my mother's hand, my mother holding my hand, the three of us sitting on the bed" (al-Shaykh, 1995 5). Zahra, her mother and her mother's lover are connected in a way usually reserved for a nuclear family unit, clearly casting the mother's lover as father in the oedipal triangle.

Quite significantly, Zahra recognizes that her mother's lover is more privileged than her actual father since he shares the same bed with her mother. She wonders about the source of the complexity of her emotions regarding the position of the man in the

---

patriarchy, stressing that he was not an adherent to or supporter of it. In *Femininities, Masculinities, Sexualities: Freud and Beyond* (1994), Nancy Chodorow similarly problematizes the aforementioned critiques of Freud's theories by stressing that his concept of "woman" is rather complex, and not monolithic at all as others would have it. She states: "Freud demonstrates for us a range of possible locations within the psychology and social organization of gender and sexuality. In his writings on sexuality and development, his cases, and his social theories, women are young girls, mothers of daughters and mothers of sons, daughters of mothers and daughters of fathers; they are heterosexual, lesbian, sexually inhibited; or frigid altogether; they substitute mothers as nursemaids, servants or governesses; they are wives, mother-symbols, or whore-like sexual objects of desirous or fearful men." (Chodorow 3-4).

[64] "This first object [the mother's breast] is later completed into the person of the child's mother, who not only nourishes it but also looks after it and thus arouses in it a number of other physical sensations, pleasurable and unpleasurable. By her care of the child's body she becomes its first seducer. In these two relations lie the root of the mother's importance, unique, without parallel, established unalterably for a whole lifetime as the first and the strongest love-object and as the prototype of all later love relations – for both sexes" (Freud, 1990 364).

love affair, once again failing to accurately identify her feelings even in retrospect.[65] The vividness of the memory, however, and her memory of the feelings that accompanied it indicate the emotional scarring brought on by her separation from the first love-object. In psychoanalytical terms, Zahra discovers and fully accepts the fact that the man is her rival, an essential component in the Oedipus complex.[66]

Zahra's memories of her childhood reveal the fundamental incidents that contributed to her separation from her mother, and the formation of her gender and sexuality. Her memories display the original disturbing moments during which she felt jealous of the man and intolerant and hostile towards her mother whose care and protection for her was interrupted. As will be articulated further at a later point, Zahra's developing psychic world is also constituted in a web of cultural and social power interactions between men and women. Zahra's sense of connection with and separation from the mother continues throughout her life, corresponding with the necessity of keeping her sense of selfhood distinct from her mother on a psychodevelopmental level, while at the same time reflecting a sort of emotional connection with the mother as devalued women living under patriarchy on a social level.

---

[65] "I saw my mother rise from the sheets and the man turn his face and body away from me as he pulled on his trousers. I was suddenly surprised to see the man and my mother in the same bed. Was it because I had grown a little and could understand certain things better? Or was it because I knew that my mother and father always slept in separate beds?" (al-Shaykh, 1995 7).

[66] Sigmund Freud describes the fairly lengthy development of what he calls the normal sexual identity, which entails the passage from the first love object, the mother for both sexes, to the opposite sex. In other words, for the female, it is a shift from homosexuality to heterosexuality. The novel does account for Zahra's transition from her relationship with her mother as her first love object to her relationships with men as an adult, and in her reluctance to move past the pre-oedipal stage, we can see an indication of her stunted development brought on by her mother. According to Flax: "The girl is left in a painful bind. On the one hand, because she is less likely to have had an adequate symbiotic experience, her needs for a sense of fusion with a caring, reliable person remain strong. On the other hand, she may lack a sense of being rewarded for making moves toward autonomy. If she attempts to regain a sense of fusion, she will not be able to be autonomous. If she exerts autonomy, she must reject the infantile mother and give up her needs for fusion" (Flax 178).

These remembered experiences are evidently too painful to be repressed and the act of remembering itself becomes an excruciating process. Returning to Freud, the seeds of Zahra’s adulthood anxiety can be found in her childhood, precisely when she developed feelings of jealously towards the man who succeeded in separating her from the mother, depriving her of the nurturing she required to achieve proper individuation later on in life. Zahra’s deepened feelings of disappointment and hostility towards her mother establish a critical moment in which the sense of self she begins to develop enables her to form her own gender identity, but it is a gender identity based on the anxiety of premature differentiation and influenced by the patriarchal structures unconsciously embraced and transmitted by her mother. Zahra’s feelings of jealousy towards her mother’s lover and pity for her father signify the initial stage at which her subjectivity and sexual identity begin to gain their characteristics, precisely when she moves from her exclusive attachment to her mother.[67]

For a powerless child like Zahra, developing feelings of anxiety and fear becomes inevitable when she is left alone, deprived from her mother’s physical protection and emotional warmth. This particular vulnerability decreases Zahra’s ability to cope with anxiety. According to Freud, if the child is left alone, or in the dark, or when s/he encounters an unknown person other than the one to whom s/he is accustomed, the child’s anxiety can be attributed to feelings of the loss of the love object, the mother. Additionally, the child is expected to experience neurotic disturbances that continue to appear in his/her development over time.[68]

---

[67] See Freud, 2000 21-22.
[68] See Freud, 1959 62-46.

Zahra later recalls the trauma of being separated from her mother during one of her many meetings with her lover. Zahra, her mother and her mother's lover are all sitting in a dark room when the man opens the shutters and places Zahra out on the balcony before shutting them again, thus putting a physical barrier between her and her mother:

> My mother hugged me and told me to stay under the shutters and not go down and play in the garden […] Before I could refuse and tell her how frightened I was, the man lifted me out on to the balcony which overlooked the garden. Before I could turn round and say anything else to my mother, the shutters were closed sharply (al-Shaykh, 1995 153).

Here, Zahra is both left alone and is physically separated from her mother. Throughout the novel, she remains haunted by her distancing from her mother and repeatedly recalls it, reliving and constantly confirming the deep effect of losing her mother's protective and comforting presence.

Although we learn from the text that Zahra gradually moved beyond the pre-oedipal stage as she gained autonomy from her mother, developing her sexuality and engaging in relationships with men, these early encounters with her mother's lover are central incidents that disturbed the developmental process of her mental and psychosexual life and participated enormously in characterizing her sexual encounters in adulthood. For instance, Zahra's preliminary experiences of fear and submission are key elements in understanding her personality as it develops, as these characteristics continue to color her interactions with men. Corresponding to the pivotal notions of psychoanalytical accounts which stress childhood trauma, the first chapter of the novel concentrates heavily on illustrating the origins of Zahra's sufferings by pointing to the early emotional consequences of losing her mother's protection and being the object of her prohibitive acts.

One example of this is the mother's efforts to deceive and use her daughter as an excuse to meet her lover, which leaves indelible marks on Zahra's personality. Zahra's mother needs her daughter's presence to successfully carry out her affair without detection and Zahra's realization of this sours the intimacy that she perceived between them: "she actually needed my protection. She wanted us to be inseparable, like the 'orange and navel.' She wanted me to shield her" (al-Shaykh, 1995 13). In the conservative sector of Lebanese society, Zahra's mother cannot leave her home without a guardian, a role that Zahra reluctantly fills, protecting her mother from suspicion. In this example, we have a case of role-reversal, in which Zahra takes on the role of guardian, or mother, and her mother becomes the child.[69]

The growing gap between the orange and its navel corresponds with the widening rift in Zahra's sense of self— the conflicting forces between her inner and outer worlds intensify her detachment from the external world. It is apparent that the mother has contributed greatly to disempowering Zahra and lowering her self-esteem and eventually, fearfulness and submission become major constituents of Zahra's character. Over time, she begins to push what is unpleasant out of her consciousness. In other words, Zahra learns as a child to suppress painful experiences as a defense mechanism and this suppression eventually becomes an unconscious act, repression. Repression, as Freud observes, is a mobile process that requires constant expenditure of energy.[70] This mobility indicates that repression is not a deliberate act. However, Zahra carries out acts

[69] Flax observes that the desire to have a child stems from the pre-oedipal relationship with the mother, rather than from the oedipal relationship with the father, as has been traditionally understood: "the wish to have a baby is also a wish to *have* a mother." This mother, however, is "the good mother who can both bestow nurturance and reward autonomy" (Flax 180). In this case of role reversal, then, it seems that Zahra's mother, rather than being "the good mother" to her daughter, is using her daughter to obtain the proper degree of nurturing (in the form of her physical presence that shelters her from the dangers of Lebanese society) and also assert her own autonomy.
[70] See Freud, 1963 108-109.

of both suppression, a conscious act, as well as repression, an unconscious act. When she suppresses her feelings of fear and resentment, resulting from childhood experiences, violent acts recur as a result, disrupting her present.

Zahra's ambiguous relationship with her mother is based on love, hatred, and fear. However, Zahra represses her feelings of hatred and fear, and the remaining love for her mother prevents her from telling her father about her mother's extramarital affair. When Zahra comes upon her father trying to beat a confession out of her mother, she is initially confused: "I no longer knew where I stood, what my feelings were, to whom I owed my loyalty." Despite this brief internal conflict, however, Zahra inevitably runs to her mother's defense: "all I knew was that I was afraid of my father, as afraid of the blows he dealt her as I was of those he dealt me" (al-Shaykh, 1995 15). This returns to the closeness of Zahra's relationship to her mother and emphasizes Zahra's inability to completely separate from her mother until much later in her life. She experiences her mother's pain, and desires to be near to her even if this physical proximity will bring her great physical discomfort.

While her mother was being beaten, Zahra "wanted to run to her, to pull her to me so we could again become like orange and navel" (al-Shaykh, 1995 14). As a result, Zahra is also subjugated to her father's violence as he tries to beat a confession out of her too. When Zahra's father returns once again to beating her mother, Zahra imitates her mother, a foreshadowing of the great influence her mother will have on her behavior throughout her short life: "seeing the blood covering her face, I tore at my hair and beat my chest, exactly as she would do herself" (al-Shaykh, 1995 15).

As alluded to above and discussed at greater length below, Zahra does not just absorb her mother’s physical responses to violence and oppression. She also internalizes from her mother the entrenched patterns of patriarchy that shape her submissive emotional and mental responses to physical as well as nonphysical forms of oppression and aggression, ensuring the continuation of cycles of gendered violence and subjugation. Flax observes that in patriarchal societies, it is the mother who is primarily responsible for the transmission of cultural norms and social codes:

> Women become the instruments of their own oppression, just as mothers unconsciously deny or repress their daughters' moves toward autonomy. "Love" is put into the service of oppression and the perpetuation of powerlessness. The life-giver becomes the life-denier (Flax 186).

In this way, Zahra’s mother shapes her developing gender and sexuality, encouraging her submission to, rather than her autonomy from and rebellion against, both the first love-object and patriarchal patterns of oppression.

These patterns map physically onto the perception of space in *The Story of Zahra* as well, gendering it in a way that reflects zones of oppression, submission and escape. Fleeing her husband’s excessive physical cruelty, the mother seeks protection in the bathroom, another act that Zahra will repeatedly mimic as a result of her own subjugation to future damaging forces, exemplified first by her uncle and then by her husband.

The home is often depicted as women’s space. We see this, for example, in the initial description of Zahra’s father’s relationship to his home: “he would announce his return home by pulling the rope attached to a small bell in the corner of our living room. He always insisted on ringing this bell before entering his own house” (al-Shaykh, 1995 10). However, the violent encounter between Zahra’s mother and father reveals that while the domestic space is women’s space, it is not a space over which they exercise

complete control. Home is ultimately then a space of oppression, where women remain subject to the patriarchal rules that dictate their movements and actions outside of the home. It is only by leaving this space and in fact all spaces under the control of men that Zahra's mother is able to carry out her affair.

This is why the mother's sexual encounters often take place in open places, like fields or under trees. Zahra's recognition of this is made apparent when she asks herself, on one of her outings with her mother and her lover: "would they choose an apple or an orange tree, or another kind of tree to lie under this time" (al-Shaykh, 1995 12)? It never occurs to Zahra that their meeting will take place in the space of the home, which is a space controlled by her father.

The space of the home is often portrayed in popular and cultural imagination as safe and desirable, a space in which we seek protection and shelter.   However, this concept of domestic space is challenged here. The very idea of the home as a safe place hides the presence of violence or domestic violence. In the novel, neither Zahra nor her mother has a positive relationship with home.

This is further demonstrated while Zahra is in Africa, when she is afraid to go back to her uncle's house, her temporary home, because she knows that she will face more sexual advances from him upon their return. Zahra's uncle makes his first move in a movie theater by attempting to hold her hand, and she spends the rest of the movie dreading its end:

> Then I thought how the lights would soon flood the auditorium and everyone leave; uncle and I drive back to his house. I wished then that the movie might never end (al-Shaykh, 1995 23).

To Zahra, like her mother, home is a space of oppression and submission where her only escape is the bathroom, whether in Beirut or in Africa.[71]

Within the space of the home, the bathroom becomes a sanctuary, but it also becomes a female prison into which Zahra is driven because of her inability to stand up to masculine structures that seek to oppress her.[72] In this small, confined space, Zahra feels safe and relaxed, perhaps because it is the only space where she is allowed any privacy and she achieves true autonomy.[73] It is the only space where her personal space is respected and the nonviolation of her body by others is assured. At the same time, the bathroom can be understood as a return to the safety of the womb, as Zahra herself later recalls: "I had curled up in my shell in some corner somewhere, or in a bathroom, hugging myself and holding my breath as if always trying to return to the state of being a foetus in its mother's womb" (al-Shaykh, 1995 154). The bathroom allows her to imagine a return to a state before the pre-oedipal stage, so she can hope that her re-emergence will be a symbolic re-experiencing of the processes of symbiosis, nurturing, separation and individuation in a more productive and positive manner.

According to Flax, "one wishes to regress to babyhood and redo the infantile development that is the ultimate source of one's troubles" (Flax 180). Zahra's association of the bathroom with the womb indicates her subconscious realization that her psychosexual development was severely impacted by her traumatic childhood and the only way she can realize a healthy sexuality is by renegotiating her mother's influence on

[71] Later, after Zahra has requested a divorce from her husband, Majed, and they are in his truck together, Zahra thinks to herself: "As we drove down the road, I kept hoping that he was looking for somewhere else for me to stay until the time came for me to go back to Beirut. I clenched my fists, perspiring and hoping that he was not taking a route back to his house" (al-Shaykh, 1995 111).

[72] "Each morning, I merely locked the bathroom door and stayed a prisoner, even as I used to seek refuge in the bathroom back home in Beirut when I was afraid of my father's penetrating eyes" (al-Shaykh, 1995 24).

[73] As Zahra explains: "It allows me to disappear in time and space; it cuts me off from all human relations. It shuts off my memory" (al-Shaykh, 1995 97).

her life and re-experiencing the process of separation and individuation to achieve true autonomy from her mother and patriarchal patterns, as she attempts to do in the second half of the novel. For the first half of the novel, however, Zahra remains trapped by her sense of gender and the emotional scars that define her.

Zahra's Relationship with Men and the Effects of Patriarchy on Her Development

Like an interrogator, Zahra's father beats her and her mother in an effort to obtain the truth. This is a classic scene where the torturer, in an effort to discover the truth, exercises his power on the body of the tortured or interrogated.[74] During this process, Zahra's father becomes othered. In his khaki uniform that he wears as an employee of the tramway, he is identified not as Zahra's father but as "Lord of the Tram-car," a God-like figuring meting out punishment from on high.

This is further confirmed by his insistence that Zahra's mother swear on the Qur'an to prove her fidelity. In this scene, the Qur'an, representing the big truth transmitted by God, stands in the middle between the truth seeker (the interrogator, the torturer) and the truth holder (the interrogated, the tortured). The Qur'an is a medium between both parties, although it is wielded as a weapon by Zahra's father, the one in a position of physical strength and authority.

As is demonstrated in the novel, sex has become a powerful secret. It empowers the one who practices and hides it, and disempowers the one from whom it is hidden. The possibility of his wife's infidelity, and his inability to confirm or discredit rumors of it, represents a threat to the father's power and justifies his need to re-inscribe his ownership of his wife's body through physical beating. As Pinar İlkkaracan describes in

---

[74] "The rhetorical structure of interrogatory torture posits a victim in a position of a hidden truth that the interrogator must struggle to uncover" (Hanson 54).

her article, "How Adultery Almost Derailed Turkey's Aspirations to Join the European Union" (2008), within Muslim societies, "sexual relations outside marriage on the part of a married woman, including rape, are generally understood primarily as assaults on men's honor as well" (İlkkaracan 49). Zahra's father is punishing not just her mother's possible transgression of the marriage covenant, but also her possible transgression of socially-enforced codes of conduct. Zahra's witnessing of and participation in this scene of oppression further cements the dominance of patriarchal patterns in her mind and the gender identity that she began to develop under her mother's influence.

Patterns of oppression and violence such as these contribute to Zahra's mental instability. Rather than merely internalizing them, as her mother and other women do, however, their seemingly endless repetition and reiteration leads to the confusion in her mind between the past and the present, accompanied by a deep depression characterized by her withdrawal from reality.[75] Zahra's early memories are so strong in her mind, they often blend with the foreground of whatever traumatic incident has made her recall them, demonstrating the deeply damaging effect of her learned submissiveness on her psyche.

For example, when Zahra's uncle puts his arm around her in the movie theater, the experience transports her back to a memory of her mother with her lover in Damascus[76] and, simultaneously, to another traumatic episode, when Zahra's cousin, Kasem, sexually abused her as she lay sleeping at her aunt's house[77], beside her grandfather: "it seemed as if a cold hand furtively moved in my panties. I woke and

[75] Flax explains that "inasmuch as society infantilizes and terrorizes women, for example, by rape and other forms of violence, the fear of losing one's autonomy may more easily be repressed. Once re-pressed, the urge for autonomy and the anger accompanying its repression may be expressed as depression"(Flax 182).
[76] "Suddenly it was as if I was back in the small room in Damascus, waking up as my mother jumped from under the bedsheets like a madwoman" (al-Shaykh, 1995 21).
[77] "Then, just as vividly, I was at my aunt's in the area of the Hotel Dieu hospital" (al-Shaykh, 1995 21).

jumped up in a fright, and the hand suddenly disappeared. But the fear and the coldness had gripped me and shaken me" (al-Shaykh, 1995 22).

This is the first real example of Zahra's physical victimization, which will become a pattern in Zahra's life. The feeling of coldness experienced during this first violation of her body will return whenever she subsequently feels violated.[78] After returning to Africa, Zahra's first re-encounter with her husband, Majed, brings on similar feelings: "Majed's hand touched mine, and at once the cold snails began their slow trailings, enveloped in thin layers of perspiration as they crawled on to my fingers and hands, spreading all over my flesh" (al-Shaykh, 1995 108).

These experiences of sexual violation occur because of the submissiveness that Zahra learned from her mother which renders her unable to physically or verbally resist the violation and aggression practiced on her body by others, increasing her anxiety and fear. Zahra's initial experience of sexual abuse is particularly significant because it occurs while she lies beside her grandfather, the one man who she truly trusts and respects.[79] Even this man who makes her feel safe, though, and who, as family patriarch, serves as guardian of the honor of the women in his family, cannot protect Zahra's body, contributing to the deep distrust of men that colors her interactions with them. This episode further undermines the faulty logic of patriarchy by demonstrating that a system that seeks to protect women through their oppression fails ultimately to do so.

---

[78] In fact, Zahra's feelings of coldness first appear as a manifestation of her discomfort with her involvement in her mother's affair, even though she does not, at the time, understand its ramifications. As she stands hiding with her mother in the dark room she explains that she felt cold, linking it with her fear. Even after the danger has passed, the presence of the mother's lover continues to make her uncomfortable: "I continued to feel shivery and uncomfortable, though the fear eventually vanished" (al-Shaykh, 1995 5).

[79] Before the incident with Kasem, Zahra sat on her grandfather's lap and thought: "as I sat there I felt safe, my hand on his back. I loved my grandfather, loved him for the love he showed me" (al-Shaykh, 1995 21).

Kasem's sexual abuse of Zahra during her childhood deeply affects her development. In *Rewriting the Soul, Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory* (1995) Ian Hacking writes that childhood sexual abuse contributes greatly to an ongoing destruction of personality and results in the child's inability to trust anyone or to establish loving and confident relationships with other people. Furthermore, he claims that the formation of multiple personalities, especially in adult women, is very likely to be attributed to childhood sexual abuse.[80] He also enumerates other symptoms of multiple personality disorder such as foggy memories of troubling events that took place in childhood, uncontrollable flashbacks, and daily mood swings.[81] It is obvious that Zahra suffers tremendously from such symptoms, and the multiplicity of her personalities is further embodied in her *Qarina*, a "kinship spirit…a jinn who invades a person's body and lies low there until, no sooner is one on the verge of sleep, than it appears, especially during the day, and starts a struggle and sets off nightmares" (al-Shaykh, 1995 98). Zahra's *Qarina* appears repeatedly throughout the novel and always further impacts her ability to respond to the world around her.

With the loss of her first love object, the mother, and as the recipient of her father's physical, verbal and emotional violence, Zahra begins to lose confidence in people. Her subsequent relationships with her lover, Malek, her husband, Majed, her brother, Ahmad, and her uncle, Hashem, intensify her belief that men are not to be trusted. The failure of the one man she trusts, her grandfather, to protect her from being violated also contributes to Zahra's feelings of vulnerability. These feelings grow so intense that Zahra suffers several breakdowns and is treated with electric shock therapy.

[80] Hacking, 63-65.
[81] Hacking, 26.

The social, cultural and political context of Lebanon fundamentally contributes to a further loss of Zahra's self-confidence, which makes her even more vulnerable to male patterns of exploitation and violation. This is evidenced in particular by the important role her mother plays in defining the major stages of the path to her psychic and gender individuation. It is apparent in the novel that women in general, and mothers in particular, are socialized to abide by the patriarchal system and live within the rules of a male-dominated society, passing on this submission to their daughters, since any attempt to resist the male practice of power would entail a high price.

Furthermore, the family structure actively participates in coding Zahra's passivity. She expresses her bitterness about her family's preferential treatment of her parents' son, Ahmad, over her, their daughter. Such preference is understood as a blatant process of favoring, where the son is considered to be more valuable than the daughter, and is manifested in the distribution of food, as Zahra explains:

> Every evening it was the same. My mother would never give me a single morsel of meat. This she always reserved for Ahmad, sometimes for my father. Her ways never changed. Maybe, she never ate chicken or meat herself. I am sure she never did at our earlier meal together (al-Shaykh, 1995 11).

Here we see that just as the mother doesn't provide Zahra with the necessary nurturance in the form of love, she also deprives her of food.

Food distribution can be understood as a form of social communication or a language of communication between the caretaker and the child. This type of communication produces and reproduces a set of rights and obligations among the members of society. The mother, as a caretaker, operates from the perspective of cultural and social notions of mothering. Ahmad is represented as well-fed by his mother who, by cultivating his physical strength, is virtually and ultimately promoting his potential

aggression. In this way, as Flax explains, "she makes herself powerful by overvaluing the son through whom she indirectly exerts power in the outside world. She thereby fulfills her own repressed wishes for autonomy and achievement." At the same time, "her only source of emotional security is her daughter, whom she cannot allow to individuate" (Flax 179).

This incident and others like it in the novel can be interpreted as indications of a process of the construction of gender inequality in a society that privileges the "Law of the Father" and restricts women's capacity to act or generate positive change. A child's sense of gender, according to Flax, is influenced by this social and cultural context:

> Becoming aware of gender in a patriarchal system means recognizing that men and women are not valued equally, that, in fact, men are socially more esteemed than women. Learning about gender, therefore, entails a coming to awareness of and to some extent internalizing asymmetries of power and esteem (Flax 172-173)

The mother's participation in the construction of gender inequality is vital here, and her effectiveness is highlighted when the mother's lover presents Zahra with a piece of broiled chicken.   Although Zahra clearly enjoys the chicken, she feels guilty for the feelings of pleasure that she experiences. Zahra imagines that, if asked by her grandfather if she enjoyed the chicken, she would reply: "No, dear grandfather, I did not enjoy it at all." This is despite the fact that she refers to it as "my extraordinary piece of chicken" and is only stopped by her embarrassment from eating the meat close to the bone (al-Shaykh, 1995 12). Zahra is ashamed by her pleasure, especially by her pleasure in participating in an activity (the eating of meat) she has learned is reserved for men.

Most of the remembered events of Zahra's childhood point to successive processes that structure her passivity and inferiority, primarily by her mother. This

observable fact can be attributed to women's internalization of patriarchal values, which eventually become part of their daily behavior. Flax observes that

> because her [the mother's] own psychological development occurred under patriarchy, it would have left an imprint upon her feelings about herself, about being a woman and being a mother. These feelings would in turn affect the type of mothering she would provide a child.

Therefore, "mothering…is not gender neutral, and…women relate differently to male and female children" (Flax 173). It is only later that these patriarchal social codings are actually strengthened and enforced by men.[82]

Yet manifestations of patriarchal power do not remain entirely unchallenged by female characters. Foucault argues that power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere.[83] And "power," insofar as it is permanent, is repetitious, inert, and self-reproducing. The other side of this, however, is Foucault's famous affirmation that where there is power there is resistance. Foucault's theory of power and sexuality has influenced feminist critics by shifting their focus from the principles of traditional powers to disciplinary powers so as to parallel the transition from traditional means of oppressing women to more insidious forms of control, as well as to highlight less obvious means of resistance.[84]

Despite the widespread impact and important ramifications of Foucault's theory, Monique Deveaux shows that his conception of power is problematic as it demolishes the "subjective" experience of women in this relationship, not allowing for the differences in the two genders' experiences of power. In short, Deveaux believes that Foucault does not address gender distinction in his theories; consequently, they are not very practical for

---

[82] It is important to assert here that concepts like "patriarchy" and the "law of the father" do not refer to timeless phenomena, universal categories, or unified entities but are socially constructed concepts.
[83] Power is produced in innumerable separate exchanges and comes from below as well as from above; that is there is no binary, all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled at the root of power relations.
[84] Foucault, 1978 93-95.

women's literature.[85] To escape the insufficiency of such models of power and gender identity, she provides alternatives that stress the inner empowerment of persons. She suggests that feminists should consider the inner dimension of interaction instead of limiting analyses to external or obvious actions of power.[86]

In the context of the novel, there is much evidence that may help reconcile Foucault and Deveaux by uncovering both the expressions of masculine supremacy and examining female forms of resistance that it makes manifest.

Within the greater framework of power, most men in *The Story of Zahra* attempt to preserve social prototypes of women through their use of tactical power. According to Foucault's model, resistance, as a basic effect of power, does not take the form of a unified exteriority to power; rather, it appears in multiple and fragmented forms. The mother's resistance to her husband's violent behavior takes the forms of lie-telling and deceit. As for Zahra, she remains mostly hesitant to express resistance against Malek and the sniper, although her relationship with the sniper can be viewed as a form of resistance to patriarchal structures and social codes, as will be discussed at greater length below.

Zahra's sexual experiences with Malek indicate the high degree of her disempowerment and are an example of the male reinforcement of patriarchal patterns originally transmitted to her from her mother. Malek, a married family friend who secures a job for Zahra, initially woos her with poetry and talk of platonic friendship. He soon pressures her into joining him in a friend's garage, and she explains that, according to Malek: "the idea of the garage was to safeguard my reputation. No one ought to see me in the company of a married man" (al-Shaykh, 1995 32). Once they are alone, the

---

[85] Deveaux, 238-40.
[86] Deveaux, 251-53.

poetry and platitudes stop, and the only focus is on sex. Zahra submits to him passively, and continues to return to him against her will, the feeling of coldness always present, although her ingrained submissiveness renders her unable to verbally express any objection.[87]

Rather than focusing on what is happening to her, Zahra distances herself from the scene of violation by thinking of the wardrobe preparations she must make for future meetings: "I could only think of the safety pin which held my brassiere strap together and hoped he wouldn't feel it; and that he wouldn't notice the run in my stockings; and of how from today I should check that my underpants are always clean" (al-Shaykh, 1995 33). Zahra's method of coping here with subjugation and violation, as is made further apparent in her relationships with her uncle and her husband, Majed, is to attempt to separate her mind from her body. However, as her experiences of violation grow increasingly numerous, the only escape she can make is into a memory of an early experience of violation, as demonstrated above and as will be discussed at greater length below.

Zahra is still a virgin when she has sex with Malek for the first time. Despite her pleas, he refuses to marry her, insisting that it is for her own good: "he didn't wish to tie me down, to stand in my way. One lecture followed another about equality between men and women, about what the true significance was of a good relationship…" (al-Shaykh, 1995 33). Here, in Lebanese society, the true significance of Malek's plea for equality, especially given the fact that he is already married, is actually sexual exploitation as the practice of sex outside of marriage is taboo and is extremely damaging to a woman's social position.

[87] "I shivered every time and had no idea why I continued coming" (al-Shaykh, 1995 32).

Zahra's loss of her virginity in this manner contributes to her distrust of men and general fragility of character. As Annie Potts explains in *The Science/Fiction of Sex: Feminist Deconstruction and the Vocabularies of Heterosex* (2002), a woman's first experience of heterosexual intercourse is much different from a man's. While a man's first experience of heterosexual intercourse is usually regarded as a positive milestone influenced by "the valorization of the sexually active man, and the cultural sanctioning of the masculinist act of penetration as a means of conquering the 'feminized' other," a woman's first experience of heterosexual intercourse "signifies her inculturation into a subordinate position in heterosexual relations, and patriarchy's entrance into her in a particularly sexual way" (Potts 199).

During Majed's monologue, when he, as Zahra's new husband, has sex with her for the first time and believes it to be Zahra's first experience of heterosexual intercourse, he articulates how he believes she must be feeling and approves of her imagined reluctance to engage in the act:

> On our wedding bed, she stretched out, avoiding my eyes. I felt her annoyance. This was as it should be. Girls are always irritable on their wedding night: fear and pain commingle. I felt she was in a state of disgust. That was also to be expected. It was her wedding night, and here was I, penetrating her (al-Shaykh, 1995 83).

Potts further explains: "through intercourse, she [the woman] is opened to the outside – to patriarchal culture – where she then becomes, more or less, 'public' property: *she is colonized by heterosexism*. Her initiation – *inculturation* – grants him the privilege to re-enter her on his own terms: that is, whenever he desires" (Potts 209). We see this clearly in *The Story of Zahra*. Once Malek has managed to have sex with Zahra, there seems to be no way for her to escape his continued advances, as she sees it. Without any effort, Malek repeatedly violates Zahra's body. Even after Zahra has her virginity surgically

restored, clearly demonstrating her intention to cut off sexual relations with Malek, it is only a short while before Malek takes away her virginity once again, "without it being any pleasure to him since he knew the restoration was counterfeit" (al-Shaykh, 1995 34).

Taking advantage of her repeatedly in the garage, Malek violates her body and impregnates her twice. Both pregnancies end with an abortion, and the first abortion is accompanied by a virginity restoration surgery, as Zahra attempts to reclaim her position of honor within the patriarchal system as a virginal unmarried woman. Zahra actually compares the feelings she has while having sex with Malek to what she feels during the abortion: "all at once I would be filled with disgust and contempt […] the same feelings that had come over me during the abortion" (al-Shaykh, 1995 33). Both experiences are equally violating to her body.

Zahra suffers a deep loss of a sense of her body with Malek by merely lying beneath him without experiencing the least bit of sexual pleasure, increasing the disconnection between her internal and external worlds. She expresses her experiences of sexual intercourse with Malek with her passivity forming the background: "this is Zahra - a woman who sprawls naked day after day on a bed in a stinking garage, unable to protest at anything. Who lies on the old doctor's table" (al-Shaykh, 1995 40). It is perhaps not surprising that this experience is related as a flashback brought on by Zahra's uncle's advances. While her uncle lies stretched out next to her, Zahra does not protest despite the feelings of violation and anger raging inside of her: "I stayed motionless. I remained expressionless. I was as if I were dead, even as a battle raged inside me, from the top of my head to the tips of my toes, and left devastation in its wake" (al-Shaykh,

1995 34). Once again, the submissiveness within Zahra runs too deep for her to directly resist this violation and aggression.

Zahra's body becomes completely exposed to Malek's power, forcing her into absolute submission and resulting in her suffering a total loss of control over her self. Moreover, her body becomes the site on which Malek writes his sexual desire, a desire to control and annihilate. In *The Production of Space* (1998), Henri Lefebvre presents us with some insightful remarks on the dualistic character of the body. He tells us that the body

> is at once symbolic and concrete: concrete as a result of the aggression to which the body is subject; symbolic, on account of fragmentation of the body's living unity. This is especially true of the female body as transformed into exchange value, into a sign of the commodity, and indeed into a commodity per se (Lefebvre 310).

Malek is exercising his patriarchal right over Zahra's commodity, her body, which has become the source of his sexual gratification. Thus, the objectified body has become timeless, a concrete entity that narrates a bleak story about passivity and voicelessness. It is only later that Zahra begins to exercise power to resist men's attempts to re-inscribe her body against her will, and even then she never directly challenges her own exploitation.

Zahra's destructive relationship with Malek results in her admission to a mental hospital to receive treatment. After being released, she moves to Africa to visit her uncle Hashem. However, he too returns her to her memories of childhood traumas by stretching out beside her on the bed. The process of remembering brought on by her uncle's violation, as well as the violation itself, causes Zahra to have yet another breakdown.

Under such mental distress, Zahra marries her uncle's friend, Majed, who feels that his honor is wounded when he discovers that Zahra is not a virgin. He is shocked and feels betrayed upon his initial discovery that Zahra has had sex with another man.[88] When Majed hints that he will go to her uncle Hashem, her fear of her family's anger and reprisal becomes clear: "Kill me…do whatever you wish…but I beg you not to tell Hashem or my family. I beg you" (al-Shaykh, 1995 87).

In her essay "Virginity and Patriarchy" (1982), Fatima Mernissi comments that

> virginity is a matter between men, in which women play the role of silent intermediaries. Like honor, virginity is the manifestation of a purely male preoccupation in societies where inequality, scarcity, and the degrading subjection of some people to others deprive the community as a whole of the only true human strength: self-confidence (Mernissi 183).

She also highlights an important contradiction in the structure of the social values that lies in men's desire to violate women's virginity before marriage and their severely unwelcoming reaction to the premature loss of it in their own wives.[89]

It is legitimate to point towards this social schizophrenia; however, essentialist thinking like this is a little extreme. It is clear that men tend to negotiate their desires and act upon fulfilling them but at the same time they can transcend the limits of patriarchy. This is manifested in Majed's attempt to overcome the fact that his wife was not a virgin when he married her. As it rests upon familial and social ethics, the perception of the premarital loss of a woman's virginity as damaging to a man's honor diminishes in the novel as it is discovered outside the social matrix that imposes it.[90] Majed reasons that far away from Beirut and his mother, no one needed to know about the blow to his

[88] "Here was I, making love to her, me the husband, she the wife. And there was no sense of a barrier to my penetration. I saw nothing; the sheets remained white. Not even one drop of blood. […] I did not ask for a sea of blood, I would have settled for one drop" (al-Shaykh, 1995 84).
[89] See Mernissi 185.
[90] See al-Shaykh, 1995 85-90.

honor.[91] This distance brings with it a certain immunity to strict cultural traditions: "Zahra's story could be my secret, for no one except myself had any knowledge of the truth" (al-Shaykh, 1995 86). In time, he comes to accept the situation.[92]

Zahra's uncle, Hashem, also removed from the patriarchal structures of Lebanese society, goes a step further in Zahra's defense when Majed requests a divorce on the grounds that Zahra was not a virgin when he married her. He dismisses the cultural importance of virginity, describing it as a concern of the uneducated and insisting that: "this is not something to make a fuss about in the twentieth century. Our generation should be seeking to influence our parents and those whose minds and attitudes remain narrow" (al-Shaykh, 1995 112).

Nonetheless, the main problem for Zahra is not her virginity as much as it is the traumatic turbulences in her inner world. Zahra's general distrust of men intensifies during her marriage. Expectedly, she fails to attain a normal sexual relationship with her husband, whose constant attempts to be close to her are viewed as mere violations of her body and space. She lies down stiffly beneath her husband's body, "as rigid as wood", a repeated image that remains an organizing factor of Zahra's responses to her body's violation and the entire world (al-Shaykh, 1995, 88). Her thoughts and feelings are centered entirely on gaining her body back after having been subject to so much violation.[93]

---

[91] "I thanked God that my mother was far away, far from this mess, and could not ask to see the stained sheets so that she might display them to Zahra's mother, to the neighbors and relatives" (al-Shaykh, 1995 86).

[92] "After several days, the intensity of these issues seemed to fade, as if such formidable questions become insignificant here in Africa, where there is no culture, no environment, no family to blow them up out of all proportion; for here every man stands on his own like a lone tree, like someone without a past who only has himself" (al-Shaykh, 1995 88).

[93] See al-Shaykh, 1995 93. Also see al-Shaykh, 1980 108. The English translation cuts off the original Arabic after Majed says to Hashem "This is Zahra's home. If she wishes it, I will leave the house, I am

For his part, Malek is skeptical about the medical reality of Zahra's eventual mental breakdown, denying the history of trauma associated with it: "What was this woman, except a liar, frightened of her own shame and making a pretense out of her remorse and regret? I could not see what connection a hospital would have with these self-evident facts" (al-Shaykh, 1995 89).

Zahra's sexual experiences with Malek and Majed are both part of a dynamic of men's control over women that enforces patriarchal values of submissiveness and docility learned from the mother during childhood. Cultural norms educate these characters to objectify Zahra's body and treat her as a mere commodity. Zahra's inability to resist or vocalize her needs leads to repeated breakdowns – her only means of escaping the patterns of violence and exploitation that dominate her life.

Race, Class, Politics, Nationalism and Male Sexuality

Although up until this point we have focused primarily on the effects of patriarchy on Zahra's development, it is important to note that in the context of the novel she and women in general are not the only ones who are made to suffer within the strict standards, traditions and codes imposed by Lebanese society. As Ann Marie Adams observes in "Writing Self, Writing Nation: Imagined Geographies in the Fiction of

---

quite prepared to do so (al-Shaykh, 1995 101)." The untranslated Arabic portion continues: "and I was thinking of escaping from this man, so strange to me and my body, and his voice, so foreign to my ear. And I was thinking of escaping from my Uncle and Talal and his girlfriend's pitying glances, and from all of Africa. I want to escape from the grave in which I buried my secrets. I want to return to myself. I want my body to return to me (al-Shaykh, 1980 108)." The Arabic reads as follows:

وأنا أفكر في الهرب من هذا الرجل الغريب عني، وعن جسدي وعن سمعي. وأنا أفكر في الهرب من خالي. أفكر في الهرب من طلال، ونظرات صديقته المشفقة علي. من أفريقيا كلها. أريد الهرب من القبر الذي ردمت أسراري فيه. أريد أن أعود إلى نفسي. أن يعود جسدي لي.

Hanan al-Shaykh" (2001), focusing only on Zahra silences the other voices of the novel: "whether in English or Arabic, the title is purposefully ambiguous about point of view and content: Zahra's tale is both by her and about her. It thus belongs to Zahra, her uncle, her husband, and her brother" (Adams, 206). Thus, in addition to its focus on the formation of Zahra, her gender identity and her sexuality, the novel also traces the development of different patterns of male sexuality in Lebanese society.

The third chapter of the novel, titled "Uncle" in the English translation and narrated from Hashem's point of view, is centered on his participation in politics as a fervent and active member of the SSNP (Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party)[94]. Hashem's involvement in the party makes him "a man with a cause" (al-Shaykh, 1995 49). His cousin, Hassan, accuses Hashem of "exaggerated party loyalty and political hooliganism," and Hashem later admits that he was right, pointing to a lack of self-confidence, which threatens his self-perception of his masculinity, as his primary motivation for participation (al-Shaykh, 1995 50).[95]

In *Masculinities* (2005), R.W. Connell states that

> "we must […] recognize the relations between the different kinds of masculinity: relations of alliance, dominance, and subordination. These relationships are constructed through practices that exclude and

[94] The Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party (SSNP) was founded in 1932 by Lebanese Greek Orthodox politician and writer Antun Sa'adeh (1904-1949), who taught German at the American University of Beirut. The chief objective of this Syrian nationalist party was the unification of the countries of the Levant, known as Greater Syria and consisting of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine. The party became very popular in 1940s and 1950s in Lebanon, attracting up to 25,000 members. With its rapid growth in power, the party came to represent a serious threat to the country, especially when its military officers attempted to topple the government in 1949. After the failed coup, the Lebanese government imprisoned and executed Sa'adeh. The party was also outlawed and its members were dismissed from governmental posts. Those who did not flee or go into hiding were imprisoned. Although severely weakened, the party continued to operate covertly until the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) when the party was ideologically divided. Many of its members sided with the PLO.

[95] "Hashem had been right when he said to me, 'You want to justify your party membership while camouflaging the fact that you are really committed because you suffer from a whole bundle of inferiority complexes. You never completed your college education, you are unable to engage in any discussion which demands more than an instinctive intelligence'" (al-Shaykh, 1995 51-52).

> include, that intimidate, exploit, and so on. There is a gender politics in masculinity (Connell, 2005 37).

The SSNP provides Hashem with an alliance that excludes a large portion of the Lebanese population, legitimizing his domination of them outside of conventional power-granting affiliations, such as education. Furthermore, the political party in which Hashem is a member provides a perfect context within which hegemonic masculinity may be cultivated.

As Connell explains: "hegemony is likely to be established only if there is some correspondence between cultural ideal and institutional power, collective if not individual. So the top levels of business, the military and government provide fairly convincing corporate display of masculinity" (Connell, 2005 77). Although Hashem's political party is not technically a part of the military nor government, in civil war Beirut, these traditional institutions break down and power is consolidated in the militias and political parties. Hashem embraces the hegemonic masculinity he locates within the SSNP and exaggerates it. When he is given permission to report to the group, Hashem places himself within the framework of institutional power: "The order, delivered in Classical Arabic, would make me feel euphoric, like a real general in a real army" (al-Shaykh, 1995 48). Hassan further accuses him of abusing his position: "You, like all the young, are obsessed with dreams of power and force. You joined the party thinking it was a boxing match" (al-Shaykh, 1995 54). Then, violence as portrayed in the chapter becomes an integral part of hegemony or domination.

After his participation in a failed coup attempt, Hashem flees to Africa. As a child, Hashem dreamt of immigrating to a highly exoticized Africa:

> How I wish to have my woman lying down and sleeping as the drums beat and I fan her with an ostrich-feather fan, peel pineapples for her

> and hold a coconut to her lips. I want to hear the voices of the jungle with her, and see Tarzan and Cheeta themselves (al-Shaykh, 1995 43).

The reference to Tarzan and Cheeta locates this fantasy within American and European narratives of Africa, revealing a racism that is both domestic and foreign. Despite his young yearnings for Africa, though, Hashem feels displaced upon his actual arrival and misses Lebanon. He is not at home here, and eventually his family and friends in Beirut stop communicating with him, erecting yet another division between him and his homeland.

Hashem staves off his homesickness for a time by forming sexual relationships with African women. However, even though his relationships with them is purely sexual, they transcend the bedroom and impact his standing in the social sphere. By crossing the race line, his chances of marrying a Lebanese woman from the community, thereby forging a connection with the homeland, are minimized.

When Zahra begins sending him letters, she represents a tenuous link to Lebanon, and when she actually arrives in Africa for a visit, she becomes an embodiment of his idealized lost homeland: "I felt I wanted to touch her hands and face and the hem of her dress. Through her I hoped to absorb all my life, both here and in Lebanon" (al-Shakyh, 1995 69). Ghandour observes that "Lebanon, which he could not change, control, or take possession of when he was in Lebanon has arrived now in Africa in the figure of Zahra" (Ghandour 243). It is not surprising, then, that Hashem attempts to control and possess Zahra in a way that he never could Lebanon.

While he awaits her arrival in Africa, Hashem wonders if any physical remainder from his former life in Lebanon exists: his name carved on a tree trunk, his bed, its sheets

and his scent upon them, his school books.[96] Hashem's materialization of his nostalgia through his memory of specific household objects is painful, not because he longs for the objects themselves but rather because they represent his former natural connection to his homeland. As Ghandour explains, "Hashem's memories of small details […] cannot be separated from the events he describes" (Ghandour 246). This marks Hashem's failure to assimilate into his new surroundings. Nostalgia always implies a critique of the present, especially if it fails, in Hashem's case, to grant him a strong sense of community or politically purposeful comradely ties.

Hashem's memory of places, times and activities from his former life is selective in nature. This very selectivity permits him to idealize the past and further involves a conscious element of amnesia, when significant unpleasant moments form the past are intentionally obliterated from the act of remembering. For instance, Hashem's frustration with Lebanon's political corruption disappears as soon as the act of remembering passes.

The arrival of Zahra, however, allows Hashem to escape his nostalgia and envision a future for himself outside of Lebanon:

> I felt that Zahra was my key to making contact with my past and present as well as my future. I thought that at last I could put down roots in Africa, provided I had this witness of my own flesh, blood and bones" (al-Shaykh, 1995 70).

Hashem's hopes are disappointed, though, first by Zahra's failure to communicate the warmth of his former familial and home spaces and second, by her failure to communicate with him at all.

Zahra is profoundly troubled and preoccupied with her own needs, which prevents her from providing her uncle with the emotional continuity with his past that he

[96] See al-Shaykh, 1995 68.

had hoped to gain. Her hand extends to him like a piece of cold plastic or she lies like wood on his bed, refusing to play the role that he has cast her in, as Hashem reveals in his inner thoughts:

> You are the only witness to my destiny. Please don't reproach me and turn into wood. I can't communicate with a block of wood. I can't reveal to it my emotions. A blood of wood has no living pores. It can absorb dew, but not my emotions, which are like streams that have swollen into torrents (al-Shaykh, 1995 71).

When Hashem realizes that Zahra is not going to fulfill his needs, he becomes desperate, his only option the continued exaltation of the communal, comrade and familial ties of his lost Lebanon juxtaposed with the weak social ties that characterize his present life in Africa. In this last plea, Hashem's selfishness becomes apparent. Until he has been totally rebuffed by Zahra and she is married to Majed, he is completely unconcerned about her needs and desires. She is merely a blank screen upon which he wishes to project his memories and fantasies.

Majed responds to Zahra in a similar way in the fourth chapter of the novel, which is titled "Husband" in the English translation and is narrated from his perspective. He sees in Zahra as well a representation of an idealized Lebanon, although one distinct from Hashem's. While Majed also has fond memories of Lebanon, they are colored by his poverty, which impacted his masculinity by engendering him with a sense of inferiority similar to that experienced by Hashem because of his lack of education. As he explains: "poverty cancels out beauty in one's perceptions" (al-Shaykh, 1995 73).

Majed imagines that the only way to transcend class boundaries is to immigrate to Africa. He is disappointed upon his arrival, though, to find in his social interactions with Lebanese immigrants in Africa that the foreign context only reinforces the class boundaries that existed at home: "I had thought that the fact of being far from home

brought people closer together. How mistaken I was. It is only money which makes you strong in the world, gives a choice of friendships and achieves equality" (al-Shaykh, 1995 77).

Zahra, too, finds that even in Africa she cannot escape the social and cultural expectations originally imposed on her in Lebanon. When Zahra behaves as others expect her to upon her initial arrival in Africa, she is welcomed into the expatriate Lebanese community. Her attempts to fit in and be "normal", though, are forced: "I have tried to make myself into what is expected" (al-Shaykh, 1995 94). She eventually betrays her social and cultural pact with the community through her aberrant behavior and despite her efforts stands out here as she did in Beirut: "as he continued to scold me, I kept thinking that now I had lost all hope. Even if I were to try to be nothing except myself and stop trying to act and speak like any normal woman who wears clothes and laughs, then he would still find fault with me, and so would they all" (al-Shaykh, 1995 96).

Zahra's mental breakdown, or madness, brought on by this situation is the result first of the physical violation of her body but also the profound sensation of othering coupled with the tension of attempting to accomplish the impossible task of forcing her body to behave in a socially acceptable way. Her failure to do so places Zahra on the margins of Lebanese society, even in the expatriate community in Africa. In his discussion of confinement in *History of Madness* (2006), Foucault argues that the process of isolating the mad was particularly important: "in the history of unreason, it signals a decisive event; the moment when madness is seen against the social horizon of poverty, the inability to work and the impossibility of integrating into a social group. It was the

moment when it started to be classified as one of the problems of the city" (Foucault, 2006 77).

Although Zahra's difference and inability to form relationships with those around her is the result of gender rather than class, unlike Majed, the similarities between the two are clear. Zahra too is unable to affiliate with a social group because of her unwillingness or inability to conform to expectations. It is also possible to see her situation as an urban issue, like the problems of class experienced by Majed. Although patriarchal structures function more strongly in the rural context of the village, it is only in an urban setting that the illusion of freedom of mobility highlights the restrictions of patriarchal limitations on the body.

As Majed sees it, the first step towards achieving his goal of making a success of himself in Africa and transcending class boundaries is to get married. He perceives Zahra as "a ready-made bride waiting" (al-Shaykh, 1995 73). When Majed marries Zahra, gendered cultural images of "wife" and "marriage" come to the forefront of his interactions with her, influenced by the low socioeconomic class of his upbringing. Both of his parents are from a working class rural community. His father repairs shoes, while his mother works outside the home as a cleaning lady, frequently bringing Majed with her when he is a child to elicit the sympathy of her employers: "having me with her increased the liras they paid her" (al-Shaykh, 1995 77). Zahra later describes them as "peasants in every sense of the word" (al-Shaykh, 1995 103). However, while Majed is not privileged by class, given his poor rural background, he is privileged by gender since he is a man in a male-dominated society.

In *Masculinities*, R.W. Connell states that

> because gender is a way of restructuring social practice in general, not a special type of practice, it is unavoidably involved with other social structures. It is now common to say that gender 'intersects'- better, interacts- with race and class. We might add it constantly intersects with nationality or position in the world order" (Connell, 2005 75).

She further illuminates that "the interplay of gender with other structures such as class and race creates further relationships between masculinities" (Connell, 2005 80). It is important to note here that Majed's masculinity is produced within the context of poverty and differs from other masculinities shaped and reshaped in the same culture within a different socioeconomic stratum. For example, while both Hashem and Majed violently project their Lebanons onto Zahra, their memories of Beirut are drastically different. While Hashem yearns to be returned to his homeland, Majed feels eternally isolated from it.

As mentioned above, Majed's first goal is to marry a Lebanese woman who can help him build a future in Africa and ascend to a higher social class:

> I needed to marry and beget children and to live in a house like everyone else if I was to become a real human being. I needed to get rid of the shyness [shame][97] and sense of inferiority which had dogged me since the beginning. I needed to work constantly so as to stack money aside that I could walk, proud and relaxed, in any place on earth (al-Shaykh, 1995 75).

Majed sees Zahra as the key to his upward social mobility. As Ghandour explains, for Majed, Zahra "functions as a symbol of an economic exchange" (Ghandour 243).

His feelings of shame and inferiority because of his socio-economic background prevent him from crossing geographical sites of power such as the rich *Hamra* Street of Beirut. This discourse of oppression resulting from class conflict here makes him feel inferior and restricts both his social and spatial mobility. Thus, both the physical space

[97] Peter Ford translates *khajal* as "shyness", but in this context, I believe that Majed's emotions are stronger than simple shyness and it would be more accurate to say "shame" instead.

of the *Hamra* District and Majed's social position circumscribe his masculinity and relatively diminish the power it is imbued with due to religious and cultural codes.

The mobility of women from traditional, rural backgrounds in Lebanese society is also culturally restricted in public places due to their femininity. However, a woman's femininity increases the more she limits her movements, while a man's masculinity is reduced by such restrictions. Zahra's mother's mobility, for instance, is contingent upon having a guardian, Zahra, who can protect her femininity. Economic, cultural and political meanings are organically embedded in space. *Hamra* Street for Majed ceases to be a neutral space. Rather, it continues to reproduce and reaffirm its power on unwelcome pedestrians or oppressed subjects like Majed.

When Majed marries Zahra, the only sexual experiences he has had are with a forty-year-old prostitute in Bourj Square in Beirut. It is perhaps not surprising, then, given the limited nature of his exposure to women, that he has maintained traditional ideas about marriage and his wife's virginity. Whenever Majed feels aroused, he is reminded of the handful of sexual experiences he had with the prostitute in Beirut and along with these memories he is forcibly reminded of his socioeconomic status. The woman lived near a restaurant and bakery, and so whenever Majed feels aroused, he smells *falafel*: "while I waited to receive the wink, I would enjoy the scent of *falafel* and have the urge to slip down for a minute and snatch a sandwich before it was my turn" (al-Shaykh, 1995 80). Cheap food here is equated with cheap sex.

Before experiencing intercourse with a woman, Majed frequently masturbates to a picture of Jane Eyre kissing Mr. Rochester in his copy of *Jane Eyre*. In this way, he retreats to his private space to seek solitary pleasure after his demeaning interactions with

others in public places. This act also gives him a sense of individuality: "a special relationship existed between me and my body" (al-Shaykh, 1995 80). He balances his marginalized selfhood of public space with his solitary pleasure of private space.

However, masturbation, as represented in the novel, is culturally regarded as a shameful and deviate sexual act as well as physically harmful to the body. These fears are transmitted to Majed after his mother discovers him masturbating one day. She approaches this perceived problem from within religious and social paradigms, treating masturbation as a mortal sin and sickness: "You'll get tuberculosis, my darling. You'll never father children! Surely it's sinful not to be able to sire children. You should curse the devil the next time he whispers to you!" (al-Shaykh, 1995 81). The mother is attempting to control her son's sexuality and discipline his natural sexual urges. She wants him to practice self-control and only have sex within its legitimate context, marriage.

Furthermore, we can appropriate Howard Gadlin's discussion of masturbation in the early nineteenth century in his article, "Private Lives and Public Order: A Critical View of the History of Intimate Relations in the U.S." (1976). Gadlin explains that "in many ways masturbation is the epitome of autonomous individuality. The masturbator is an eroticized caricature of the self-sufficient person." This is extremely dangerous in a society, like traditional Muslim societies, that emphasizes social cohesion and the importance of the collective over the individual. Masturbation is dangerous as a solitary act because "persons with strengthened individual egos threatened social cohesion to the extent that such persons were less responsible to others" (Gadlin 315).

Although Majed disobeys his mother, continuing to masturbate and later, to visit the prostitute, he too yearns to confine sex to marriage, practicing his masculinity within traditional patriarchal norms. However, when he attempts to marry at age eighteen, he is refused by the daughters of good families who do not want to marry a villager. Majed is therefore relieved when he finally marries Zahra: "here I was, married at last, the owner of a woman's body that I could make love to whenever I wished" (al-Shaykh, 1995 83).

The dynamics of class and gender that shape Majed's development are further influenced by race. In "Doing Difference" (1995), West and Fenstermaker demonstrate that "no person can experience gender without simultaneously experiencing race and class" (West and Fenstermaker 13). Race becomes relevant to Majed upon his decision to immigrate to Africa. His mother cautions him against engaging in sexual activities with African women, referring to them as *'abdaat* (black slave women) and enforcing the racial stereotype that "African girls…lie in wait for young white men as though they were birds to be hunted" (al-Shaykh, 1995 8). She warns him that they will try to entangle him, and if they succeed, his children will end up like Maha, the Lebanese daughter of an African woman: "You see how the other children laugh at her and say, 'Blacky-black with white teeth.' She has no future. Who would ever marry her, with that kinky hair and her rusty color? Poor girl! Do you want to have children who are persecuted like that, and you along with them?" (al-Shaykh, 1995 82).

The mother, functioning here as guardian of culture and protector of Lebanese identity, views African women as a threat, and others a fellow Lebanese woman with African blood. In "*Adam* and *Adama*, *'Ird* and *Ard*: En-gendering Political Conflict and Identity in Early Jewish and Palestinian Nationalisms" (1996), Sheila Hannah Katz

highlights the common casting of women as guardians of culture in nationalist discourses: "as 'patriotic' wombs, it was not enough for women merely to marry and have children. They also played a central role as boundary markers of national identities" (Katz 91). This was accomplished first and foremost by avoiding intermarriage themselves, and then passing this value on to their children. Adams further affirms that in national discourse, women often "figured as 'mothers' of the 'nation' and as protectors of culture and ethnic values" (Adams 203). In this case, Majed's mother is serving as just such a "protector of culture" in her attempt to shield her son from the foreign influence of African women.

Here we see clearly how race, body, class and beauty are at play, a process experienced simultaneously by Majed. It is not just Majed's mother's words that create a barrier between him and "the daughters of Africa": "It was their looks. I could never imagine my body uniting with one of theirs. I could never accept their thick lips, their barbaric hair, their black skin" (al-Shaykh, 1995 82).[98] Blackness here is signifier of ugliness. Majed views the female black body as a site of savagery and is disgusted by it. The mother goes a step further by commenting on the manipulative character of black women.

Majed's focus on the unnaturalness of the African women's blackness draws attention to the color of his own skin, *'white'*, as a normative color. As his imagined gaze encounters a black woman, the *black/white* gap is reinforced, condemning and

[98] The original Arabic text continues: "inseparable from the smell of sweat" (al-Shaykh, 1980 88). With this addition, Majed enhances the vivid and multilayered sensory experience of his repulsion. The Arabic original reads as follows:

وهذا الجسد الأسود الذي لا تفارقه رائحة العرق.

simultaneously glorifying his whiteness. The black body, according to his mother is ready to ambush and sully his whiteness. It is clear that Majed's identity as a Lebanese Muslim Arab man is juxtaposed with the other's identity as a black African woman, but whiteness seems to be the more determining factor in the social interaction here.

It is clear from this discussion, then, that both Majed and Hashem colonize Zahra, forcing her to embody their longed-for ideal of Lebanon and attempting to re-inscribe their masculinities on her body. As Adams explains: "in many ways, Hashem's and Majed's complementary visions of Zahra actively foreground the ways in which women are ossified and abstracted in national discourse" (Adams 203). Ghandour elaborates: "at the level of narrative as history, Zahra's body, then, circulates in a symbolic economy of exchange, to be appropriated by men who see her as a symbolic substitute for the country they miss" (Ghandour 244). The inherent violence of this symbolization is evident in Zahra's response to it: both the physical and the metaphysical violation of her body cause her to withdraw into herself in similar ways. Her thoughts shortly before her frenzied escape to Lebanon are loaded with her desire to escape from both of these forms of violation and violence: "I wanted to live for myself. I wanted my body to be mine alone. I wanted the place on which I stood and the air surrounding me to be mine and no one else's" (al-Shaykh, 1995 93). Zahra, then, resists both the physical abuse of her body, and its symbolic appropriation by others.

The Mad Woman in the Bathroom[99]

Zahra's withdrawal from reality and her mental breakdowns are a desperate expression of her inability to control her body or her environment. Her refusal to adhere

[99] This is a reference to Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's seminal work, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (2000).

to social norms and expectations transforms her into an outsider. These quiet acts of personal rebellion label her as mad even before she succumbs to the very real mental instability that repeatedly leads to her hospitalization. In this sense, and in the Lebanese context, Zahra is in many ways reminiscent of As'ad al-Shidyaq[100], an early Maronite convert to Protestantism whose unsanctioned sectarian transformation in 1825 was perceived as madness and led to his subsequent persecution.

As'ad came from a prominent family and his conversion at the hands of American Protestant missionaries led to his confinement in the Qannubin Monastery, then torture and ultimate death around 1830, as a heretic in the eyes of his people, and as a martyr in the eyes of his new faith. Ussama Makdisi writes in *Artillery of Heaven: American Missionaries and the Failed Conversion of the Middle East* (2008) that "the imputation of madness to As'ad […] was […] almost certainly rhetorical at first" (Makdisi, 2008 116). However, As'ad's continued resistance to attempts to convince him to return to his Maronite faith, originally attributed to everything from youth to greed, characterized him as mad. Makdisi explains that "it was only when As'ad obstinately refused to return to the fold, only when he deliberately spurned abundant opportunities to repent, that the depiction of As'ad as mad became a dominant trope […] with each passing day his evangelical demeanor was considered by the Maronite clergymen increasingly symptomatic of a hopeless derangement" (Makdisi, 2008 116-117).

The real problem was As'ad's determination to proselytize, which

> constituted a direct challenge to the conservative language of quietism, separateness, and past achievement that allowed different religious communities to coexist under Ottoman rule. Moreover, it violated the

[100] As'ad Ibn Yusuf Ibn Mansur al-Shidyaq (1798-1830) was born in what is today Lebanon. As'ad is the elder brother of one of the most prominent intellectuals of the 19th century, Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq (1804-1887).

> widely held taboo among all communities in heterodox Mount Lebanon not to engage openly in religious controversy (Makdisi, 2008 117).

This perceived madness was the motivating factor for As‘ad’s torture at the hands of the Maronite priests: “beating was supposed to drive out the evil that inhabited the body and poisoned the mind” (Makdisi, 2008 127). His treatment was also to serve as a determent to others considering taking the same path, while his confinement further insured that his madness would not spread to others.

As‘ad’s madness, like Zahra’s, is at its root a rebellion against authority, and its label is used defensively by those in power to discredit those who speak truths that challenge established systems. As‘ad directly threatened the power of the Maronite Church as well as the delicate balance that seemingly permitted the coexistence of multiple confessional groups under the Ottoman Empire. Zahra, through her refusal to adopt roles perceived as normal and interact with society in sanctioned ways, questions the demands made on her body and mind. While madness, when applied as a label from outside, is a means of neutralizing rebellion, the desire to rebel is also the fuel for the willful adoption of this title as a means of self-defense, a protection, when an individual seeks to negotiate an identity perceived in certain ways as deviant from or even dangerous to the continuation of the social order.

Lebanese author Kahlil Gibran[101] (1883-1931) was born to a Maronite family in the village of Besharri in Mount Lebanon, across the valley from the Qannubin Monastery in which As‘ad was tortured and died. He was so taken with his tale that he wrote a short story inspired by it called “Yuhanna the Mad” in his collection *‘Ara’is al-Muruj* (1906, *Nymphs of the Valley*). Additionally, he became a fervent critic of the

---

[101] Kahlil Gibran immigrated to the United States with his family in 1895. Gibran wrote in both English and Arabic. His most famous book is *The Prophet* (1923).

manipulation, abuse of power and exploitation practiced by the religious establishment and the State. His critique of religious authority permeates his writings, such as in *al-Arwah al-Mutamarridah* (1908, *Spirits Rebellious*) and *al-Ajniha al-Mutakassira* (1912, *The Broken Wings*).

In these texts, Gibran approaches rebellion and free-thinking as a form of madness stemming from access to higher truths that leads to self-affirmation, especially in the story of Yuhanna. "Yuhanna the Mad" ends with the following lines: "You are many and I am one. Say what you will of me and do to me as you wish. The ewe may fall as prey to the wolves in the darkness of the night, but her blood will stain the stones of the valley until the coming of the dawn and the rising of the sun" (Gibran 735). Struggle, in other words, is never in vain and what is considered madness one night may be seen as a kind of truth in the daylight.

Like Zahra, al-Shidyaq and Yuhanna were both labeled mad by the society they sought to change, because reason required the acceptance of social norms, religious traditions and ingrained structures. Furthermore, the label of madness successfully isolates the individual from the rest of society, condemning his or her behavior and guaranteeing that his or her rebellion will be contained and its dangerous repercussions will be minimized. In the Lebanese context, where both culture and religion discourage free-thinking and individuality, even the smallest challenge to tradition can be considered a form of derangement. While this localization is important, Zahra's madness takes on new dimensions when *The Story of Zahra* is examined within the corpus of world literature.

Majed's reference to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (2001) is particularly interesting in that it highlights the parallels between Zahra and the English novel's own deeply troubled character, Bertha Mason, who is also the main character of Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1999). Although a comparison of three such different texts may seem unmerited, it is justifiable from both comparativist and feminist perspectives. All three novels are widely read outside of their own culture of origin and are therefore open to comparison within the context of world literature.[102] In *Unexpected Affinities: Reading across Cultures* (2007), Zhang Longxi argues that wide-ranging comparison, based largely on theme and content rather than form, can enhance our understanding of a text, allowing us to re-think it in new ways.[103] In this way, I will expand upon my reading of madness in *The Story of Zahra* by comparing it to *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Jane Eyre*. A similar argument can be made from a feminist perspective, as all three texts have been studied extensively from within the field of contemporary feminist criticism, rendering a comparison between the three both natural and beneficial. Many interesting parallels exist between the three texts, but I will focus in this section on a comparison between Bertha/Antoinette and Zahra.

While Bertha is held captive in Mr. Rochester's attic, Zahra voluntarily sequesters herself in the bathroom – an act that, as mentioned above, is nonetheless referred to as imprisonment.[104] Both Bertha and Zahra are considered mad or crazy by the men

---

[102] In *What Is World Literature* (2003), David Damrosch defines world literature. It first "encompass[es] all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language" (Damrosch 4). And ultimately, world literature is "not a set canon of texts but a mode of reading: a form of detached engagement with worlds beyond our own place and time" (Damrosch 281).
[103]"Sometimes, the cross-cultural perspective may change the way we look at texts and help us better appreciate literary themes and poetic images" (Longxi 45).
[104] The important difference here between Zahra and Bertha is of course that Zahra chooses her isolation, even if she sees it as a last resort and therefore a kind of imprisonment. For Zahra, the bathroom can be seen as a parallel of sorts to the asylum, as a place of healing. Jean Khalfa in her introduction to Foucault's

surrounding them, but a careful examination of their early lives and development reveals that their mental disturbances are the result of repeated trauma. Bertha's personal history is problematic as she exists only in the background of *Jane Eyre*, as a shadowy figure silenced by Mr. Rochester's own descriptions of her. She eventually must die to create a space for the foregrounded heroine, Jane. As Mona Fayad explains in "Unquiet Ghosts" (1999): "in Brontë's text, the well-being of Jane depends on the death of Bertha. In the *his*tory of patriarchy, the well-being of man depends on the reduction of woman to a ghost" (Fayad 226). Bertha is given a voice and a presence, however, in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* in a narrative structure that closely resembles that of *The Story of Zahra*.

In *The Story of Zahra*, the reader is granted a female viewpoint through the chapters narrated by Zahra. In this way, Ghandour explains, Zahra resists patriarchy's attempts to reduce her to ghost as well:

> by telling her own (hi)story Zahra is, in fact, disrupting the coherent continuous narrative of the patriarchal story of the state. In other words, Zahra's story subverts the dominant discursive narrative of the patriarchal story, the prevalent discourse in Lebanon (Ghandour 234).

The Story of Zahra is a forbidden speech act that allows Zahra to rebel against the discourses that have made her a "speechless entity". Ghandour points out that "Zahra is, in fact, transgressing an official code of history by telling her own story, which is itself a story of transgression" (Ghandour 235). What is meant by this second point is that Zahra's narration is made even more rebellious by the type of memories she invokes – what Ghandour refers to as "counter-memories" because they "are buried in the

---

History of Madness describes this process as follows: "madness, which has been alienated by society, is now defined as psychological alienation, an alienation of the self from itself and the space of confinement as a space where the self can gather itself again" (Khalfa xviii). Zahra needs the bathroom as a location in which she can put herself back together (even if these efforts are unsuccessful at times). Bertha's isolation in the attic has no parallel healing effect.

unconscious, for they are usually considered 'unethical,' like Zahra's personal history, because they pertain to sexuality and are not customarily discussed in the open" (Ghandour 248). Even with the inclusion of Hashem and Majed's monologues, Ghandour observes that "Zahra's voice in this section engulfs the male voices of these two chapters" and "relegates their discourses to the status of marginality, to the level of footnotes that help in understanding Zahra's story, the history of Lebanon" (Ghandour 242, 245).

In contrast, while Michael Thorpe points out in "'The Other Side': *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Jane Eyre*" (1999) that many have understood Jean Rhys's novel as "an act of moral restitution of the stereotyped lunatic Creole heiress in Rochester's attic," he praises Rhys for her "even-handed treatment of the sexes" (Thorpe 173). Only two of the three parts of *Wide Sargasso Sea* are narrated from Bertha's (Antoinette as she is called in this re-telling) point of view, and she shares the narration of the third section with Grace Poole, her female nurse at Rochester's home. The second part is narrated by Edward Rochester himself, just as two chapters of *The Story of Zahra* are narrated from a male point of view (Hashem's and Majed's). Rhys's and al-Shaykh's goals seem to be similar: to avoid over-simplification and the one-sided victimization of the woman, even if Bertha and Zahra's points of view are prioritized.[105]

Antoinette tells Edward Rochester in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, "There is always the other side, always" (Rhys 77). Similarly, Joseph T. Zeidan in *Arab Women Novelists:*

[105] In "*Wide Sargasso Sea* and a Critique of Imperialism" (1999), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak emphasizes this point: "Rhys makes it clear that he [Rochester] is a victim of the patriarchal inheritance law of entailment rather than of a father's natural preference for the firstborn: in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rochester's situation is clearly that of a younger son dispatched to the colonies to buy an heiress" (Spivak 243).

The Formative Years and Beyond (1995), insists that the inclusion of Majed and Hashem's points-of-view, despite Ghandour's claims,

> makes it possible for al-Shaykh to write a story that demonstrates the complexity of the relationships among war, sexuality, feminism, and nationalism; that holds society at large accountable for the construction of oppressive values; and that also holds the reader accountable as an individual because, in identifying on some level with Hashem and Majed, the reader is discouraged from projecting his or her own participation in oppression onto convenient 'villains' (Zeidan 207-208).

Hashem and Majed, like Mr. Rochester, are not villainized, but nor are they absolved from their participation in oppression, even when these acts are normalized within contemporary discourse and entrenched patriarchal structures.

Other parallels between *The Story of Zahra* and *Jane Eyre/Wide Sargasso Sea* link Bertha/Antoinette and Zahra to each other. Majed marries Zahra largely because he sees in her the opportunity for upward social mobility, and therefore a re-imagining of his masculinity, as she realizes when she sees how poor his family is:

> I realized what an immense gulf existed between our family backgrounds and saw the answer to the mystery of why he had married me, despite all my shortcomings: my pimples, my constant clumsiness, my moodiness, the fact that I ignored so many social graces (al-Shaykh, 1995 104).[106]

Rochester, similarly, marries Bertha because she is from a wealthy family. As the eldest son, Rochester's elder brother is the sole inheritor of his father's estate. Bertha's family accepts the arrangement in turn because Rochester is both white and from a good family: "her family wished to secure me, because I was of a good race; and so did she" (Brontë 260). Both Zahra and Bertha are commodified in their marriages, and both Rochester and Majed feel, in the end, that they were cheated in the deal.

---

[106] On their wedding night, Majed confirms Zahra's perceptive observation: "I have married Hashem's niece and so fulfilled the dream I've had ever since being in the south […] of marrying the daughter of an illustrious family" (al-Shaykh, 1995 83).

Majed and Rochester share the disappointment that neither Zahra nor Bertha will help them to build the household that lay at the foundation of their aspirations, as such an arrangement was vitally important to both social and financial success in both contemporary Lebanese society and the period of declining aristocracy of which Rochester was a product. As Majed explains, Zahra's mental breakdown is troubling to him because it means that she will stand in the way of the creation of just such a household:

> I found I was irritated by her behavior as the reason and hope for which I had married her began slowly to erode. She had no fondness for me, would not help me in making a fortune from my work. It was clear that, in her present state, she would be incapable of looking after children (al-Shaykh, 1995 90).[107]

Rochester voices similar disappointments about Bertha: "I perceived that I should never have a quiet or settled household" (Brontë 261). Bertha and Zahra's refusal to submit to traditional male expectations of them can possibly be read as an act of rebellion, although the actual trauma underlying their mental illness should not be minimized.

In *Women and Madness* (1972), Phyllis Chesler views women's madness as just such an act of rebellion: "women have already been bitterly and totally repressed sexually; many may be reacting to or trying to escape from just such repression, and the powerlessness it signifies, by 'going mad'" (Chesler 37). In Zahra's case, the only way that she can force the men in her life to respond to her needs is to completely shut down. Zahra's mental instability becomes a weapon in al-Shaykh's novel with which she resists all those who try to control her and her body.

---

[107] As quoted above, Majed's primary goal is to start a household: "I needed to marry and beget children and to live in a house like everyone else if I was to become a real human being" (al-Shaykh, 1995 75).

She additionally uses her unbeautiful and unhealthy body as a site through which she rebels against patriarchy – for example, by picking at her acne despite her father's interdictions against this self-mutilation:

> My father would go raving mad every time he noticed my face and its problems. He would nag my mother sarcastically: "That will be the day, when Zahra marries. What a day of joy for her and her pock-marked face!" Once he beat me when he caught me standing in front of the mirror, squeezing at my incipient spots (al-Shaykh, 1995 24-25).

Despite his anger, Zahra continues to pop her pimples, further scarring her face in defiance of his orders, stressing his inability to exercise complete control over her body.

However, using madness to represent women's rebellion has undesirable effects due primarily, as the previous quotation illustrates, to the inevitable slippage between "madness" and "mental illness". While in *The Mad Woman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar make it clear that their discussion concerns madness as a metaphor, not mental illness in the clinical sense, this distinction proves impossible to maintain. Fictional representations of madness have a way of influencing clinical discourses of mental illness and vice versa, and it is important to re-emphasize that both Bertha and Zahra's madness are the result of very real trauma.

As described in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Bertha's childhood, like Zahra's, is plagued by a neglectful mother as well as by a number of traumatic experiences. The most obvious of these is the slave revolt that leads to the burning of and her exile from her childhood home, Coulibri Estate. This loss of home haunts her dreams, and the fire she starts that ultimately destroys her recalls this earlier trauma.

Fayad draws special attention to Bertha/Antoinette's use of fire in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, arguing that by burning down Rochester's house and destroying herself along with

it, “she reappropriates fire from patriarchy, reversing the witch-burning syndrome” (Fayad 238).[108] Bertha/Antoinette further

> proves that the ‘sanity’ of institutionalized patriarchy is self-destructive, for repression and suppression will burn it up from within. The denial of the life principle can only lead, literally, to death. Fire cannot be contained. Sooner or later it must escape its controls to burn everything around it (Fayad 238).

This reading of fire brings new meaning to Zahra’s own reference to it, not included in the English translation:

> Dear God! The things I feel whenever Majed comes close to me! Cold winds, cold, crowding me close with thousands of snails crawling closer…*My resistance is to stop this crawling. I must uproot it with knives, destroy it with fire*. I wanted to live for myself. I wanted my body to be mine alone (al-Shaykh, 1995 93; italics: al-Shaykh, 1980 99).[109]

Zahra’s own reappropriation of fire similarly seeks to burn-up the patriarchal structures that hold her prisoner. However, like Bertha, while Zahra’s complete success will ensure her reclamation of her own body, freeing it from the constraints and controls placed on it by men and patriarchal discourse, the unleashed fire will also destroy her.

In Zahra’s case, as discussed above, madness is a manifestation of her repression of violations of her innocence and body that began at an early age and have continued throughout her life. In this case, Zahra’s breakdowns become a way of coping with the forced remembrance of these episodes induced by her experience of another violation.

---

[108] Fayad cites Mary Daly, who asserts: “fire is a source and symbol of energy, of gynergy. It is because women are known to be energy sources that patriarchal males seek to possess and consume us. This is done less dramatically in day-by-day draining of energy in the slow and steady extinguishing of woman’s fire” (qtd. in Fayad 319).

[109] This moment begins chapter 5 of the first section, “Zahra in Wedlock”. Just a few pages before in Majed’s monologue, he too makes reference to fire. Following Zahra’s breakdown, Majed goes to her uncle, Hashem, to tell him of her behavior, believing it to be merely an expression of her shame at the premarital loss of her virginity. Hashem, however, goes into a panic and by the time they have returned to Majed’s house, he is in a similar state: “For a moment I thought, as he did, that Zahra had killed herself. I expected to find her body enveloped in flames” (al-Shaykh, 1995 89). Read in the light of Fayad’s analysis, we can view this moment as Majed’s unconscious recognition of the destructive and ultimately tenuous power of the patriarchal structures of oppression to which he has subjected Zahra.

Within this context, the confining space of the bathroom to which Zahra retreats provides comfort and offers the desired, unyielding boundaries that keep the rest of the apartment or house at bay. At the same time, however, Zahra feels trapped, because much as Bertha is physically prevented from escaping from the attic, Zahra views the space of the bathroom as a self-imposed prison, outside of which she is unable to move freely and maintain sole control of her body. And, even here, as she later explains, her sense of power is illusory since it has no permanence: "withdrawing back into my shell had been exhausting because it drained me of all control over my body" (al-Shaykh, 1995 154).

III. *The Story of Zahra* – Part II

Healing through War is only Skin-Deep

The second half of *The Story of Zahra*, narrated exclusively by Zahra, traces the dramatic changes that she undergoes upon her divorce from Majed and return to Beirut, where civil war has broken out. It is in the context of war that Zahra begins to successfully overcome her emotional scars, resist the roles that her mother, male relatives, lover and society cast her in and re-conceptualize her sexuality and sense of gender. However, as I demonstrate, Zahra's acts of rebellion and her concurrent healing can only occur within the context of war, indicating their impermanence and her inability to fundamentally change the patriarchal patterns that structure her society or her place within them.

Throughout the first half of the novel and much of the second, Zahra's body is trapped by her negative self-image. As a child her bones are weak and she is bow-legged. That is why she must accompany her mother to receive calcium injections, the

pretext at the beginning of the novel for leaving the house to meet her mother's lover. Zahra does not see herself as beautiful, has bad acne and is portrayed as sickly.

Zahra views her body as a site of shame because it is imperfect and flawed. She further disfigures it by picking at her acne, permanently scarring her face, neck and even shoulders. Though Zahra's anxiety about her body permeates the pages of the novel, she still attracts men such as her lover, Malek, her uncle, Hashem, and her husband, Majed. This attraction can be characterized as largely non-physical. As discussed above, its source is located within culturally constructed images of gender and power or within what Zahra signifies for the men – Lebanon itself.

As Adams emphasizes, *The Story of Zahra* is often read as an allegory in which Lebanon is projected onto Zahra, and the fate of the nation is mirrored on her body: "the successive stages of Zahra's brief life mirror the movement of the conflict itself" (Adams 202-03). The eruptions of acne seem to correspond to the turmoil erupting within Lebanon itself. However, as Adams argues, Zahra repeatedly resists this categorization: "the fact that Zahra is no mere symbol for a masculinely defined nation is seen in the explicit fact that Lebanon is never at 'peace' in this text, at least not for women" (Adams 204).

While Zahra's bodily imperfections and scars can be read as signs of the war to come or the wounds inflicted upon Lebanon herself during the confessional conflict, as the nation literally turns inwards against itself, Zahra's acne is also an expression of her more personal struggles. It reflects both the "emotional scars" of her childhood and "also literalizes the ever increasing gender conflict carried on in society – the 'battle' between men and women for the control and regulation of female bodies" (Adams 204). This

struggle is expressed in Zahra's continued mutilation of her own face despite her father's attempts to stop her. Furthermore, Zahra's acne functions as a self-erected barrier, shielding her self from men by preventing them from looking beyond her physical appearance.

When the war first breaks out, Zahra gains weight, but she is still the same Zahra, as signaled by her continued struggles with acne: "the only resemblance between Zahra now and Zahra as she was are the scabs on her face" (al-Shaykh, 1995 123). She views the isolation imposed by the war as an escape, making her home into a refuge separated from the outside world in the same way the bathroom previously provided such a haven: "what is there outside this house except for anxiety, worry and sorrow? Here I am totally relaxed" (al-Shaykh, 1995 124). Zahra sees in the war a means, beside mental breakdown, through which she can escape the roles and expectations that society and her family wish to impose on her: "when I heard that the battles raged fiercely and every front was an inferno, I felt calm. It meant that my perimeters were fixed by these walls, that nothing which my mother hoped for me could find a place inside them" (al-Shaykh, 1995 125). This respite gives her time to recover from her experience in Africa.

In time, however, Zahra begins to view the war as another violation of her autonomy and person: "now, in spite of my belief that everything that happened in the night would evaporate with sunrise, I woke up riddled with aches, as if, during the night on my bed, two men had beaten me with whips" (al-Shaykh, 1995 128). Zahra also minimizes her own suffering by subsuming it to that of the nation.[110]

---

[110] "I sat on, punishing myself, feeling guilty for all the times when I had felt uncomfortable before the war, and for all the misery which I had thought was misery before the war, and the pain which I had thought was pain before the war" (al-Shaykh, 1995 134).

In the early days of the war, Zahra's family forces her to escape with them to their village in the south, far removed from the realities of the situation in Beirut. Unable to bear the relative normalcy of the rhythm of life in the village with the war raging in the city and distressed at having left her brother, Ahmad, alone in Beirut, Zahra returns to her family's apartment on her own.[111] It is at this point, on her own, without any familial supervision and with social controls limited by the chaos of the war, that Zahra begins to undergo major changes, rebelling against the patriarchal social encoding begun by her mother and enforced by her relationships with men.

She experiences the first stirrings of her sexual awakening, although feelings of shame, embodied by her *Qarina*, prevent her from achieving orgasm and release during a particularly vivid fantasy or dream: "whenever I longed to complete a shiver, to reach my climax, I felt embarrassed by her presence" (al-Shaykh, 1995 144). While Zahra is beginning to move beyond the boundaries imposed by society, in this example re-thinking her sexuality, she is as yet unable to completely transcend them.

As Miriam Cooke observes, the war gives Zahra a purpose as she begins to integrate into its dynamics.[112] Similarly, Accad notes that war has allowed Zahra to move beyond the trauma of her past. She no longer seeks protection in the bathroom,[113]and her flashbacks of prior violations are significantly less frequent. Her feelings of empowerment bring to mind Foucault's notion that power is not centralized within a single source or position, but can in fact come from everywhere. They also complement Deveaux's statement about the significance of one's inner empowerment.

---

[111] Although Zahra moves away from the city of Beirut twice over the course of her life, first to Africa and then to the village, she always returns to it. Beirut is a central space for her. While it is the source of extreme violence during the war, it is also the only possible escape from patriarchy Zahra has.
[112] See Cooke 57.
[113] See Accad 57.

Zahra recognizes that the violence of the conflict has reached its climatic point and society is out of control. In this environment of excessive violence, she gains a sense of continuity with her past, which was also characterized by violence. Zahra's subjectivity has been fundamentally shaped by aggression against her and her body, and so it is not surprising that she flourishes when the city is consumed by it as it naturalizes her own traumatic past: "it begins to occur to me that the war, with its miseries and destructiveness, has been necessary for me to start to return to being normal and human" (al-Shaykh, 1995 161). It is in this context that Zahra develops a relationship with a sniper who controls the street with the constant threat of destruction that he represents to passers-by. With the sniper, Zahra reaches orgasm for the first time in her life.[114]

As Accad demonstrates, death, sex, and the war are all associatively present in Zahra's walk toward the sniper.[115] To return to Deveaux's emphasis on empowerment, it is apparent that Zahra feels inwardly empowered and motivated to rebel against entrenched social structures through her sexual relationship with the sniper, who towers overhead atop the roof of a high building. Monuments and towers themselves have a phallic aspect and exude political and patriarchal authoritarianism as representatives of repressive space.[116] Lefebvre emphasizes that the vertical is "arrogance, the will to power, a display of military and police-like machismo, a reference to the phallus and a spatial analogue of masculine brutality" (Lefebvre 144).[117] Zahra's entry into this male space is forbidden, and therefore liberating. By ascending the stairs to the sniper's

---

[114] "My lord and master a god of death who had succeeded in making my body tremble with ecstasy for the first time in thirty years" (al-Shaykh, 1995 154).
[115] See Accad 54.
[116] Lefebvre 144.
[117] Furthermore: "verticality and great height have ever been the spatial expression of potentially violent power" (Lefebvre 98).

position, Zahra challenges traditional, assigned gender roles, rejecting the submission and weakness assigned to her. She, if only fleetingly, becomes a part of the phallic power represented by the vertical, becoming complicit in the sniper's brutality and masculine violence.

As is evident from Zahra's visits to the sniper, power and sexuality are subject to negotiation. As she attempts to divert him from aiming his rifle at passers-by, the sniper's touches and caresses empty her body of past traumas, preparing her for death.[118] She gains a sense of her body and temporarily triumphs over her previously conquered self through the empowering force of sex, which has even given her the courage to purchase birth control pills. Observing a picture of a Persian woman hanging in her room that has always intimidated her, she no longer feels self-conscious: "it seems that I have joined that species of woman and am able to bear a comparison with her" (al-Shaykh, 1995 184).

Unfortunately, Zahra's empowerment is short-lived. Upon discovering that she is pregnant, she decides that the only solution is suicide. Even this escape will not save her, though, because she fears that upon her death, everyone will learn that she is pregnant. Before, and even after, visiting the doctor, Zahra is convinced that her bulging stomach is actually the result of a cancer growing inside of her. Either way, she knows that whatever is inside her will kill her: "was this cancer in the guise of a fetus?" (al-Shaykh, 1995 200). Zahra harbors the brief hope that the sniper will marry her, but in the end, she is unable to escape the final tragedy of her life as the sniper kills her.

Here we see that even though Zahra manages to rebel against society and the patriarchal social codes that have governed her body, experiencing her sexuality in new

[118] See al-Shaykh, 1995 152.

and liberating ways, she cannot effect any permanent change. While war grants women more mobility, any freedom they experience is temporary and contingent upon the war itself. Adams stresses that upon her return to Beirut, "Zahra may finally register a relationship with her society, but this is problematically predicated on the war itself" (Adams 205). Her efforts to sustain the changes that she undergoes in a permanent way (for example, through marriage) can only result in failure.

Men, the Civil War and the Male Gaze

In addition to the fleeting freedoms enjoyed by women during the Civil War, men find that they too practice their masculinity in different ways. In some cases, this leads to a weakening of their power to dominate and control as traditional patriarchal structures are undermined. At other times, men are able to utilize violence and aggression more effectively, strengthening their sense of gender.

Either way, no permanent changes are made to the social structures and discourses that dominate daily life, as Adams explains: "the men may fight, loot, and destroy, and the women may feel a certain sexual freedom, but there is no ultimate release for them through the war."[119] She is particularly critical of Sami, the sniper, who, by killing Zahra and his child, "destroys […] his chance to rebel constructively against a society that fashioned him an expendable member" (Adams 207). While *The Story of*

[119] In the second half of the novel, the racial, class and gender differences that structure Lebanese society and were highlighted in the first half of the novel are temporarily leveled by the war, just like the streets and buildings of the city. Zahra observes that: "the war has made beauty, money, terror and convention all equally irrelevant" (al-Shaykh, 1995 161).

Shame, too, that ever-present regulatory force in times of peace, has also been weakened by the war, as evidenced by Ahmad's relationship to masturbation (al-Shaykh, 1995 164). He demonstrates no shame towards this act of self-pleasuring even when he knows that he has his sister as a witness. In contrast, Majed's memory of being caught while masturbating by his mother is full of shame and fear (See al-Shaykh, 1995 80-82).

Zahra stresses repeatedly that men are just as much a victim of patriarchy as women, their unwillingness or inability to challenge the dominant discourse also make them enablers of this system of oppression.

Ahmad, who joins in the fighting, often justifies the war as a means of regaining control over the city, the center of order. However, he actively participates in the creation of chaos and the exploitation of unarmed, defenseless Lebanese citizens. Ahmad becomes a part of a larger system of masculine oppression, using the excuse of membership in a violent combat group to defend his actions: "to belong in a group makes you part of the war and not a murderer. Your gun isn't a gun, but an object you carry naturally. And the group digests you so that you forget you are an individual" (al-Shaykh, 1995 138). Rather than using his power constructively, Ahmad gets caught up in group-think, and becomes obsessed with the thrill of minor transgressions rather than taking any steps to effect serious change.[120]

Although Ahmad is never given his own chapter like Hashem and Majed, his long monologues in this section, spoken largely to himself, insert his narrative into the text. It is here we learn that even though Ahmad has found purpose in his life during the war, like Zahra, the changes that he has undergone are contingent upon its continuation: "the war has structured my days and nights, my financial status, my very self" (al-Shaykh, 1995 168).

Although the war has granted Ahmad greater autonomy and power, his participation in the overtly masculine war machine has also caused him to become more patriarchal and oppressive. Even as a young child, Ahmad worked as an agent of

[120] "Nothing that moves or doesn't move is outside our control. We are the force and power and everything! No day passes in which I do not perform an act once prohibited by government or law or mere public opinion" (al-Shaykh, 1995 163).

patriarchy, exercising his power over his sister, inculcating social norms and principles. This is evident in Zahra's early memories of him. She recalls the first book he gave her to read, *Dracula*, the story of a man who sucks the life blood out of women and depends on their destruction for his own survival. Zahra also recalls the plays that Ahmad used to stage, always casting her in the role of maid.[121]

Once he has gotten caught up in the war, however, Ahmad does not even stop at violating his own sister, masturbating within earshot of her, which causes her to recall similar treatment at the hands of other men:

> Even though I am in the adjoining room, I can still hear your moans of pleasure. Doesn't the fact of this bother you, even as you masturbate? Did Majed and Malek feel as you do as they took their pleasure on my body while it remained as stiff as wood and I sensed a clammy chill in every pore? (al-Shaykh, 1995 165).

The war also changes Zahra's relationship to her parents, first in their absence, and then further upon her mother's return to Beirut. As Zahra continues to visit Sami, she realizes that she has overcome her fear of her father, almost wishing that he would discover her in the act of sex, an act of rebellion against him and society: "Oh, sniper, let me cry out in pleasure so that my father hears me and comes to find me sprawled out so. […] Let my father see my legs spread wide in submission" (al-Shaykh, 1995 161). Here, the cries that Zahra releases during orgasm are not primarily an expression of pleasure. Rather, by invoking her father and focusing her energy on him, rather than her lover, during the moment of release, Zahra's cries become battle cries, representing an act of direct resistance against her father and an assertion of her sexuality. Zahra uses her new sense of gender to challenge and disrupt patriarchy.

---

[121] This portion is excluded from the English translation. See al-Shaykh, 1980 137:

الذي كان يحضر التمثيليات، ويعطيني دور الخادمة دائما.

However, Zahra's defiance disappears when she discovers that she is pregnant, to be replaced with a deep fear. This time, however, her terror stems not from her father's physical abuse but from the belief that he will confirm her fears that she has become like her mother, emphasizing Zahra's inability to permanently escape the stigma of having sex outside of marriage: "I don't want my father to find out I am pregnant, even though his anger can change nothing. In these times, shouting and screaming and even sadness have lost their meanings. But I do not wish to hear my father say, even in mutterings to himself, 'Like mother, like daughter'" (al-Shaykh, 1995 210).

Zahra, too, seems to blame her mother for her current crisis, indicating that the fear, anxiety and submissiveness her mother instilled in her shaped her development in damaging and emotionally scarring ways, preventing her from forming a healthy sexual relationship within a socially acceptable context. Imagining her father's reaction to her pregnancy, she pictures him beating her mother and saying:

> Like mother, like daughter. No matter how hard you try to make things otherwise, the daughter will still follow her mother's example. You're to blame, you bitch. You sold your honor and your daughter's with it. Who got her pregnant? You tell me that! Why couldn't you go to your lover on your own? Why did you always have to take her along as witness? That poor, innocent, wretched creature? (al-Shaykh, 1995 198)

These accusations, though leveled at her mother in her father's voice, seem to be coming from Zahra, a fact that is confirmed when she expresses her desire to share the secret of her pregnancy with her. This is not because she wants her mother's support or help, but because she wants her mother to experience her pain, as her mother made her suffer: "I do not want her to escape the burden of this pregnancy. […] I want her to feel my fear in the way that she made me feel her anxiety as we stood together in that darkened room" (al-Shaykh, 1995 200). For Zahra, her pregnancy is in the end a kind of revenge.

` Ultimately, the war seems to be very hard on both Zahra's brother and her father, and in this sense it and the struggling nation map more directly onto their bodies than they do onto Zahra's. Physically, Zahra's father grows increasingly weak as the war continues, and Ahmad's developing dependency on drugs also intensifies, signaling the damaging effect that it is having on both of their bodies as well as their abilities to effectively practice their masculinities as they did before the war.

At the outbreak of the war, Zahra's father's body language reflects this weakness: "my father presses his transistor radio against his ear and walks slowly about, his head tilted to one side. He looks as if he has just had his appendix removed" (al-Shaykh, 1995 124). Zahra's father no longer stands up straight, his movements have become slow and more restricted, and his tram uniform has been replaced by pajamas, signaling a decrease in his authority and masculinity. After a round of bombing that shakes their apartment building, Zahra notices that her father has undergone a number of changes as he ages rapidly:

> He was no longer a fat monster on whose chest and shoulders black hairs curled like cockroaches. I noticed how thin his body had become, and how his head had developed a constant trembling (al-Shaykh, 1995 138).

Zahra is struck as well by the change in Ahmad's body, signaling a similar deterioration of his body, and also the masculinity it embodies, brought on by the war: "he had also grown terribly thin" (al-Shaykh, 1995 138). Looking at him, Zahra wonders: "Oh, war, why did you rescue me and reject Ahmad? Or, does Ahmad think that the war rescued him and rejected his sister?" (al-Shaykh, 1980 179).[122] In this sentence, Zahra reveals her

[122] I believe this section is mistranslated in Ford's English translation. It reads: "Oh, war! Why, in coming to my rescue, do you make me reject Ahmad? Yet perhaps he thinks that it is for his own redemption that the war exists, and so he rejects his sister" (al-Shaykh, 1995 164).

concern for her brother and her own guilt over both her flourishing during the war and her transgression of social boundaries.

Before the war, both Ahmad and his father represented strong, fully nourished male representatives of patriarchy. As the war rages on, however, their bodies grow weak and their ability to enforce social codes and cultural values decreases, allowing Zahra to flourish and become empowered. Even though meat and eggs continue to be reserved for Ahmad, Zahra begins to nourish her body as well, as indicated by the weight that she gains. She thus escapes the gendered system of preference that has consistently privileged Ahmad's body over her own.

Zahra's final relationship with a man, Sami, is the one that ultimately destroys her. The sniper is the all powerful God of death who controls the neighborhood.[123] Zahra originally goes to him as an act of sacrifice, hoping that her presence will distract him from his task of killing passers-by. In going to him, Zahra crosses a boundary, beyond which she is able to practice further transgressions. She "[walks] from the street of life to the street of death and destruction which the sniper's bloc, directly next to [her] aunt's, overshadowed" (al-Shaykh, 1995 157). In this world of death, however, Zahra is able finally to come to life: "it began with me climbing the stairs to find him and feeling life start to revive in me" (al-Shaykh, 1995 146).

Zahra stresses that the sniper is just another man: "here was, after all, another human being, who had thoughts and asked questions. Who was Lebanese. Who knew where the Pigeon Rock – our lovers' leap – stood" (al-Shaykh, 1995 148). This

---

The Arabic text (al-Shaykh, 1980 179) reads as follows:

آه يا حرب، لماذا أسعفتني ونبذت أحمد.

[123] "Our street, once ruled by the spirit of life, now has death for its overlord" (al-Shaykh, 1995 132).

assertion of normalcy seems to be confirmed by Zahra's inability to achieve orgasm or experience pleasure during sex with him. However, this changes in time, and orgasm has a healing effect on Zahra: "my cries became like lava and hot sand pouring from a volcano whose suffocating dust was burying my past life" (al-Shaykh, 1995 152). Sami empties Zahra of her past trauma and insecurities, distinguishing himself from the other men in her life who recalled, rather than distanced her, from these memories, and foreshadowing his role as her ultimate executioner.

The healing effect the violence and chaos of the war and particularly her meetings with Sami have on Zahra is highlighted in her descriptions of their relationship. Addressing him in her mind, she pleads: "Oh, you who digs these deep craters in my body, can't you dig deeper and deeper until another orifice opens and sets free these old, fearful moments, these images that have until now haunted all my days" (al-Shaykh, 1995 161). These craters that Zahra craves will, she believes, provide an outlet for the past traumas that haunt her, and also mirror the destruction of the city itself, whose streets "had been transformed into craters – big and small, of every type, shape and color" (al-Shaykh, 1980 172). Zahra recognizes Sami's power, identifying him repeatedly as the dominant individual in the neighborhood, and this association further empowers her by association.[124]

In "Destruction: Boundary Erotics and Refigurations of the Heterosexual Male Body" (1995), Catherine Waldby characterizes traditional perceptions of the male and female body as follows: "the male body is understood as phallic and impenetrable, as a war-body simultaneously armed and armoured, equipped for victory. The female body is

[124] "Did everyone know I was on my way to visit the one who ruled here? Was this why they let me pass like the Queen of Sheba amid their disquieted stares?" (al-Shaykh, 1995 182).

its opposite, permeable and receptive, able to absorb all this violence" (Waldby 268). Sami, the sniper, from his God-like perch is indestructible and Zahra absorbs his violence both through his sexual penetration of her and though her intentional disregard for the violence he practices on others.

Because of this, Zahra develops feelings of guilt associated with her relationship with the sniper and, more significantly, with her experience of her own pleasure.[125] Due to these feelings, Zahra begins to desire a cessation to her visits, but at the same time, she fantasizes about marrying Sami. Nothing binds them together, however, apart from the war and their sexual relationship.[126] In fact, their relationship can only exist in the liminal space represented by the sniper's building which lies outside of "the street of life" and therefore outside Lebanese society. This positioning is emphasized by the location of their lovemaking, on the stairs. Zahra wonders, "is it possible that our bed will remain the stairs of the building of death?" seeming to recognize the impossibility of relocating their relationship within the clearly defined boundaries of their society (al-Shaykh, 1980 178).[127]

Rather, the sniper, with his rifle and binoculars, and with the power of his gaze, constructs a controlled space, defined by the limits of his vision and his rifle's range. It is instructive to refer here once again to the spatiality inherent in the sniper's gaze. It is

---

[125] "Was I some vulture become human, or had the devil taken human form in me that hot afternoon when my *Qarina* called my name? How did I manage to be so relaxed in this war? My days had beginning and end. I felt secure, even though the rockets still screamed and roared with unabating vigor. I was even able to sleep" (al-Shaykh, 1995 160).

[126] "There's no dialogue, nothing in common between us, apart from our lying together on the floor" (al-Shaykh, 1995 174)

[127] The Arabic text (al-Shaykh, 1980 178) reads as follows:

هل من المعقول أن يبقى سريرنا سلالم بناية الموت.

only from his position atop the apartment building that the sniper can exercise control. The importance of the building's verticality once again comes into play, and with it its status as Phallus. Lefebvre notes that: "the Phallus is seen. The female genital organ, representing the world, remains hidden. The prestigious Phallus, symbol of power and fecundity, forces its way into view by becoming erect." He goes on to discuss the interaction of the eye and the Phallus to create privilege and power. Lefebvre explains that "the eye in question would be that of God, that of the Father or that of the Leader. A space in which this eye laid hold of whatever served its purposes would also be a space of force, of violence, of power restrained by nothing but the limitations of its means. […] The space, too, of military violence – and hence a *masculine* space" (Lefebvre 261-262). In *The Story of Zahra*, the eye, from his vertical position of power, is the sniper, the God of death. In this way, the sniper manages to create borders, dividing a single street into multiple spaces – a space of death, ruled by him, and a space of normal life, asserting his masculinity in new and creative ways.

Laura Mulvey in her ground-breaking essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1999), investigates the ways in which films construct and maintain hierarchical gender relations by privileging the male gaze at the female body—the gazed-at – over the female gaze, ultimately denying it any power. Her conceptualization of the male gaze ties it inextricably to patriarchy. She states:

> In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness (Mulvey 837).[128]

---

[128] This concept has been re-appropriated and employed in many fields of knowledge including narrative studies. It has also often been linked to Foucault's theory of the panopticon and power.

For the purpose of this study, the concept of the male gaze is pushed beyond the fields of the filmic and visual arts to scrutinize the literary acts of seeing and being seen in *The Story of Zahra* as they relate to gender relations. The focus here is on the patriarchal gaze as an othering, objectifying, and controlling device—gazing is seen here as a powerful apparatus used to frame the body while simultaneously producing and reproducing its meaning.

However, I also move beyond Mulvey's theoretical framework to suggest that acts of gazing as represented in the novel can be comprehended and examined discursively. In the following, I discuss the power of the male gaze, as exemplified by Zahra's father, brother, uncle, cousin, husband and the sniper. However, I also highlight the ways in which Zahra exerts power that is diametrically opposed to that emanating from the male gaze. Throughout the novel, Zahra finds ways to resist, subvert, limit, dim, or block the male gaze, until she encounters the overtly masculine, militarized gaze of the sniper.

In the case of Zahra's father and brother, Ahmad, the war dilutes the force of their gazes. Before the war, Zahra is controlled, monitored and also violated by the gazes of her male relatives. Zahra's first memory of sexual abuse, involving her cousin, Kasem, is tied symbolically to his gaze when she believes, even in the darkness, that she "saw the glint of Kasem's spectacles" (al-Shaykh, 1995 22). When Zahra is in Africa, and begins to regularly retreat to Hashem's bathroom, she recalls how in Beirut she would seek refuge in the bathroom to escape her father's gaze:

> each morning, I merely locked the bathroom door and stayed a prisoner, even as I used to seek refuge in the bathroom back home in Beirut when I was afraid of my father's penetrating eyes – afraid he

> would discover what I had grown into, afraid he would kill me (al-Shaykh, 1995 24).

With the outbreak of the war, however, and Zahra's empowerment along with her father's physical deterioration, her father's gaze loses its potency: "neither do I still fear […] his piercing eyes, which now seem covered by moist veils that shift with the constant shaking of his head" (al-Shaykh, 1995 173).

Ahmad's gaze also loses its patriarchic power to control and dominate Zahra, a weakness intensified by the drugs he takes that dull his senses and powers of observation. He actually justifies his use of them to Zahra by telling her that drugs allow him not to see things as clearly as he once did: "drugs have given the war a new dimension […] They help you to see the war through a filter that screens the eyes and shades the trigger. It cancels out what is seen" (al-Shaykh, 1995 168). Despite the weakening of her father and brother's gazes, however, Zahra maintains a memory of them, embodied in her *Qarina*, which continues to control her by providing a witness to her shame and acting as a female agent of the male, patriarchal gaze. This is made evident during the aforementioned fantasy or erotic dream that Zahra has, in which she is unable to reach climax because the *Qarina* keeps her monitoring gaze fixed on her.[129]

Even before the outbreak of the war, Zahra develops methods to combat and challenge the male gaze. The most common of these is her refusal to meet the male gaze or her inability at times to even see the man who is directing his gaze at her; in both of these cases, Zahra deflects the male gaze or disrupts it. Zahra's gaze, as opposed to the male gaze, gains its power in these cases when it is withheld. By refusing to meet or

[129] "I felt myself shiver with pleasure under the gaze of my Qarina as she watched me from her corner. Whenever I longed to complete a shiver, to reach my climax, I felt embarrassed by her presence" (al-Shaykh, 199544).

acknowledge the objectifying male gaze, it is unable to register its absolute power. As long as Zahra is aware of the male gaze it retains some of its potency, but by deflecting it, Zahra is able to lessen her submission to and participation in its oppression. These instances of quiet rebellion are exemplified in her interactions in Africa with her uncle, Hashem, and her husband, Majed.

When, for example, Zahra meets Majed for the first time, she will not look him in the face: "I danced without any rhythm and trampled all over his feet. My palms sweated and I kept my head turned away from his face" (al-Shaykh, 1995 28). Majed observes this behavior repeatedly during the chapter that is narrated from his perspective, and Zahra seems subconsciously aware of it as well.[130] For example, when they have sex for the first time, he notes: "on our wedding bed, she stretched out, avoiding my eyes" (al-Shaykh, 1995 83).

After Majed discovers that Zahra is no longer a virgin and they quarrel, Zahra begins to mentally withdraw. Majed describes her state:

> Zahra remains unyieldingly distant and cold, her eyes staring unblinking out of the window. She doesn't speak, nor does she move, except to visit the bathroom. I never see her eat or drink. As days go by she sits on the couch with a transistor radio and a blanket as if she had leased this spot to be her new home and declared territorial limits. I had no idea she was in such a bad way. I thought it was only because she was still afraid and ashamed that she pretended not to see me (al-Shaykh, 1995 88-89).

Zahra responds to the oppressive situation by attempting to reclaim her body by turning inwards, thus shutting out the male gaze. In this way, as Majed offhandedly describes, Zahra manages to once again create borders around her body, resisting the patriarchal gaze that has sought to territorialize it. Finally, while Majed believes that Zahra is only pretending not to see him because she is ashamed, we learn later from Zahra's

[130] See also al-Shaykh, 1995 82, 84, 87, 107, 108, 113.

perspective that she actually succeeds in visually blocking him out, thereby completely interrupting his gaze.[131]

After returning to Beirut, Zahra resolves to become like a window, diluting the male gaze by forcing it to look through her, rather than directly at her:

> I would like everything about me to grind to a halt and for me to become like a window through which one looks and through which things are seen to move, while the window itself remains silent and still, observing people come and go (al-Shaykh, 1995 118).

Continuing with the window imagery, Zahra explains just a few pages later that: "from that point on I never allowed anyone to peep in through the narrow opening by which I viewed the world outside. I blocked off every aperture through which anyone might try to reach or touch me" (al-Shaykh, 1995 126). In this way, Zahra hopes to shield herself from the male gaze, and she succeeds until she meets Sami.

Zahra recognizes the power of the sniper's gaze, as do all the inhabitants of the neighborhood, before she ever has any contact with him:

> How is it that death has come to rule over half the street, directing that a child will fall, a man or a woman will fall, each with a bullet in the brain, each one alive and moving, even laughing or crying, at the very moment when they walked into the sniper's sights? (al-Shaykh, 1995 132).

The sniper's masculine gaze, implied in the reference to his rifle's sights, effectively controls the neighborhood through its inherent violence.

Zahra's first interaction with him occurs when she ascends to the roof of her aunt's building half-naked, with the goal of disrupting his gaze. Here, in contrast to her relationships with her male relatives, Zahra is actively seeking out the male gaze, in the

---

[131] See al-Shaykh, 1995 95. Zahra has a similar reaction during her earlier breakdown in Africa, brought on by Hashem's advances. She observes: "I couldn't even see him [Hashem]" (al-Shaykh, 1995 37).

hopes that by focusing it on her, the sniper will not visit the violence of his gaze on others:

> I wondered what could possibly divert the sniper from aiming his rifle and startle him to the point where he might open his mouth instead? [...] perhaps a naked woman, passing across his field of fire? Maybe if such a sight crossed his vision he would pause for just one moment and wonder whether the world had indeed gone mad in the midst of this war (al-Shaykh, 1995 157)

When she sees him, however, he is looking at her directly, without his rifle scope or his binoculars: "as I turned about as if to go in […] my eyes met his as he stood without binoculars, gun or pitcher, a solitary figure next to the water cistern" (al-Shaykh, 1995 158). While the sniper fixes Zahra with his gaze here, it is the gaze of a man looking at a woman, so while it is imbued with patriarchal hierarchy, it is no longer militarized.[132]

When Zahra finds that she is pregnant and it is too late to have an abortion, Sami agrees to marry her. Then, however, Zahra makes the fatal mistake of asking if he is in fact the sniper. As referenced above, Ghandour shows Zahra to be a woman who is a "speechless entity" for most of the text, but her story is also "unspeakable" because it seeks to represent what is forbidden by the patriarchal society in which she exists.[133] Therefore, "Zahra dies at the end when she had dared to speak. During her relationship with the sniper, Zahra kept being both the 'unspeakable' and a woman who cannot speak her mind" (Ghandour 240). When she is finally empowered to the point of being able to challenge these characterizations, she must be punished for such a transgression.

---

[132] "I had got him to look at me as a man would look at a woman in peacetime" (al-Shaykh, 1995 159).

[133] In *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (1989), Marianne Hirsch argues that in patriarchal society, all women's narratives are "unspeakable" and so just the act of relating, even if the tale does not treat traditionally taboo subjects such as sex outside of marriage as in the case of Zahra, reverses patterns of subjugation: "through the voices of daughters, speaking for their mothers, through the voices of mothers speaking for themselves and their daughters, and, eventually perhaps, through the voices of mothers and daughters speaking to each other, oedipal frameworks are modified by other psychological and narrative economies. Thus the plots of mothers and daughters do not remain unspeakable" (Hirsch 8). This theme is explored at length below in the chapter on Alawiyya Subuh's *Maryam of Stories*.

Zahra recognizes that she may have died at least in part for her broken silence:

> He kills me. He kills me with the bullets that lay at his elbow as he made love to me. He kills me, and the white sheets which covered me a little while ago are still crumpled from my presence. Does he kill me because I'm pregnant. Or is it because I asked him whether he was a sniper? (al-Shaykh, 1995 214).

The reader will never know the answers to Zahra's questions. I suggest, however, that neither Zahra's attempts to use the freedoms of war to effect lasting change in her normal life nor her desire to speak could have a place outside of the context of war, and so it is only natural that she would be destroyed when she tries to permanently alter her assigned social/cultural position. Furthermore, the sniper's murder of both Zahra and his unborn child is a continuation of the pattern of violence that holds him captive.[134]

The out-of-frame Sami frames and simultaneously magnifies his target, the in-frame Zahra. Both the sniper's militarized and demilitarized masculine gazes converge at a deadly climactic point, becoming indistinguishable. Paradoxically, this convergence reveals that the deadly masculine gaze is turned against itself, not only killing Zahra, but also killing the unborn son in Zahra's womb.

Alternatively, this scene can also be read as a re-interpretation of the binding of Isma'il (the binding of Isaac in the Judeo-Christian tradition). In the Qu'ran, Abraham is commanded by God to sacrifice his son, largely presumed to be Isma'il. When they both submit to His will, it is revealed to have been a divine test, which they passed, and Isma'il is spared.[135] In *The Story of Zahra*, Sami becomes Abraham and Zahra's unborn child can be read as Isma'il. In this light, Sami's sacrifice of his own child can be

[134] Upon their decision to marry, Sami touches Zahra's belly and tells the child: "I hope, God willing, that you will be born to be a fighter, surrounded by the noise of rockets and bazookas" (al-Shaykh, 1995 209).
[135] See Qur'an, al-Saffat 37:99-113.

interpreted as a selfless act performed in an attempt to cease the cycle of violence that each new generation of male children continues.

Zahra's Death as the Death of Female Resistance?: Reading the Novel's Closure

The closure of the novel, in which Zahra and her unborn child are shot and killed by Sami, can be understood on three different levels: political plot, patriarchal plot, and narrative plot. Politically, it is clear that Zahra had to die to carry a message to readers. Zahra's sexual climax harmonizes with the climax of narrative. After this, things fall into their normal order as the plot begins to resolve. In his classic work *Aspects of The Novel* (1927), E. M. Forster remarks that

> in the losing battle that the plot fights with the characters, it often takes a cowardly revenge. Nearly all novels are feeble at the end. This is because the plot requires to be wounded up. […] Alas, he [the author] has to round things off, and usually the characters go dead while he is at work, and our final impression of them is through deadness (Forster 95).

The closure of *The Story of Zahra* seems to reflect this struggle between the author and the characters that s/he has laboriously constructed. The problem, according to Forster, is that "the characters have been getting out of hand, laying foundations and declining to build on them afterwards" (Forster 96). It is therefore the author's job to hijack the characters' voices and steer these creations, often identifiable only by their names as their characteristic actions and words have been subsumed to the larger project of tying up the plot. This process can occur even to the narrator of a novel, as in the case of *The Story of Zahra*.

We can see this struggle in Zahra's death at the hands of the sniper. In this way, both of them are prevented from constructively rebelling against patriarchy, effectively sending a political message to readers about the entrenched nature of patterns of

oppression. Zahra has to be punished for her transgressions against patriarchal patterns so that the critique of these patterns' inalterability can be complete. It is instructive, in light of Forster's remarks, to question both the sniper and Zahra's complicity in this final act. Yes, Sami is repeatedly shown to be an active participant in the violence that his tender relationship with Zahra belies, but is Zahra's murder truly a natural response to her pregnancy and sudden questions? It is difficult to say for sure in Sami's case, but if we turn to Zahra, we have her thoughts, analyses and an entire lifetime of experiences to weigh this final experience of death. At first glance, Zahra seems, in the end, to recognize her unwilling complicity in her murder, finally realizing that her transgressions could only lead to this ultimate act of punishment: "I close my eyes that perhaps were never truly opened" (al-Shaykh, 1995 215). It is also possible, however, to read this thought as a recognition that her story, the plot in which she is entangled, is bigger than both she and the sniper.

In this sense, we can understand the ending of the novel as being written on the body of Zahra, who, against her will, is ensnared in a familiar patriarchal plot. Zahra's fate is, to use Frank Kermode's words, "immanent rather than imminent" (Kermode 30). In other words, the plot has not been destroyed or dismantled by the sniper's bullet nor has it taken an unexpected turn. Rather it harmonizes with the beginning of the novel, with Zahra's desire that her mother's hand never stop pressing against her mouth. The end confirms and emphasizes the beginning — Zahra's original desire to be eternally suffocated and everlastingly silenced.[136] Because such an understanding is circular, we

[136] It is interesting to note that this circularity appears in *Wide Sargasso Sea* as well. Allison Booth observes that "Rhys leaves Jane Eyre's foil on the verge of repeating the ex-slaves' act of destroying the house of imperialism; thus a 'different' heroine rebels against her own previous writtenness" (Booth 23). In a way, Zahra similarly destroys the house of patriarchy, by allowing herself to be destroyed along with

can alternatively assert that the story begins where it does because of how it ends. Wallace Martin observes in *Recent Theories of Narrative* (1986) that "it is the end of the temporal series – how things eventually turned out – that determines which event began it: we know it was a beginning because of the end" (Martin 74).

Regardless, the sniper's bullet brings the beginning, the middle and the end of Zahra's story together in a fatal but inevitable conclusion that emphasizes the total submission of Zahra's body to the patriarchal patterns she only briefly and fleetingly managed to resist. The ultimate meaning of Zahra's story, which she consistently embodies, is permanently inscribed on her body as she fails to rescue it from the exploitive, controlling and always violent male gaze.

Finally, at the level of narrative plot, it is instructive to turn to Alison Booth. In her introduction to *Famous Last Words* (1993), Booth investigates the various possible endings or closures to a novel. Conventional endings include marriage and death.[137] This, Booth posits, is because as the fictional world of the novel dissolves into reality, "the heroine's prospects are scaled down" to make her story palatable to readers and society at large (Booth 2). Both marriage and death were possible endings in *The Story*

---

the future agent of patriarchy embodied by the fetus in her womb. Sami speaks rarely in his interactions with Zahra, but he does break his silence to express his hope that their future son will be a fighter (see footnote 88).

[137] In her introduction, Booth is speaking primarily of the 19th century novel of manners. However, heroines in this time period were constrained by patriarchal patterns of oppression that controlled their participation in society on the basis of gender (as well as, of course, on the basis of class and race) in ways similar to those imposed on Zahra. Despite the temporal and spatial differences between *The Story of Zahra* and for example, *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen, their heroines are equally trapped at the end. Their only options are death or marriage, forcing "the end of a woman's 'ambitious' plot," which is "unspeakable" and therefore "nonnarratable" (Booth 2, 8). Despite the rise of experimentation in the novel, Booth observes that "familiar narrative patterns nevertheless persist" (Booth 26).

In *Aspects of the Novel*, E.M. Forster also concludes that death and marriage are the most expedient ways of wrapping up the plot. As he explains: "if it was not for death and marriage I do not know how the average novelist would conclude" (Forster, 95).
Aspects of the Novel. E.M. Forster. Harcourt: New York, 1927.

of Zahra as Zahra rushed home from her final visit to the sniper, imagining their future nuptial bliss, and both would have succeeded in resituating Zahra in a context sanctioned by patriarchal society by either relocating her sexual affair within the bonds of marriage or silencing the evidence of rebellion. The sniper makes the ultimate decision, selecting death over marriage and highlighting the impossibility of their relationship's success outside the chaos of war.

On the surface, then, it would seem that Zahra has been silenced and patriarchy has once again won in the end. However, Booth highlights in her introduction the "ways in which heroines subvert the closure enforced by the dominant discourse" (Booth 3). In other words, either suppressed elements of the heroine's story or the form of the text itself find ways to undermine its formal closure, demonstrating that "there never was the perfect patriarchal closed circuit" (Booth 4). A close examination of the closure of *The Story of Zahra* also reveals a certain feminist triumph.

Booth explains that one of the most powerful tools of resistance available to the heroine at the end is that of voice (expressed through dialogue) or overt narration, as is the case in *The Story of Zahra*: "the image of wronged woman is quite capable of shattering its pantomime pose with a 'telling' act of revenge" (Booth 16). In this way, the heroine can re-imagine or re-contextualize her own end. Zahra accomplishes this by narrating the entire second section of the novel, including her own death. In this way she indicates patriarchy's inability to completely silence her, her story and her acts of rebellion, even in death.

Chapter Three

Deadly Pleasures: Gendered Aggression and Sacred Violence in Najwa Barakat's *Ya Salaam*

I. Introduction

Ya Salaam, published nineteen years after *The Story of Zahra*, reflects back on the war and its aftermath. The novel focuses on a group of friends struggling to survive in post-war Lebanon. It is interesting to note, however, that while most critics and readers assume that the city in Barakat's novel is Beirut, as I do in this dissertation, it is never named. This serves to universalize many of the ideas on violence, gender and sexuality expressed in the text.

Barakat herself explains that the challenge facing her when she sat down to write *Ya Salaam* was how "to write a nonsectarian novel with tools that could not be anything but sectarian" (N. Barakat, 2006). She was referring, of course, to names – of people, but also of places, which carried a host of associations during the sectarian strife of the Civil War. Barakat hoped to transpose some of the anonymity she has enjoyed since her childhood because of her name into her novel. She explains that

> the name Najwa does not carry a sectarian connotation like Mary, Rita, Zaynab or Fatima. And my family name, Barakat, would not help or add the hoped-for piece of information since it would make things even worse, adding to the confusion as it was a very common name you would come across in many areas in Lebanon, be them Christian, Muslim or Druze (N. Barakat, 2006).

The problem was, however, that it was impossible to completely detach the complicated reality of Beirut from the problem of sectarianism. So as not to reduce her characters to their sectarian identities, however, Barakat chose to write a novel without place names. In this way, she explains, "I began to move in an absolutely narrative geography, which was sometimes distinctly Lebanese and other times distinctly Arab" (N. Barakat, 2006). The characters, then, could function across time and place, existing in any post-civil war society, although the presence of certain elements, such as the Lebanese dialect and certain vague geographical descriptions, tended to evoke Lebanon.

During the war, Luqman, a first-rate bomb-maker, al-Abrass, a brutal torturer, and Najib, an exceedingly meticulous sniper, form their own powerful vigilante militia group that ruthlessly persecutes civilians, despite their stated goal of protecting the neighborhood against other militarized factions. They become a law unto themselves, sowing chaos rather than the order they claim to represent. After the war, they all have difficulty adapting to their new lives since they are no longer able to wield power and negotiate their masculinities in the same ways.

The featured female character in the novel, Salaam, plays a key role in the lives of these three men: she becomes engaged to al-Abrass, but he is brutally murdered when his mother, Lurice, learns of his activities during the war and kills him so as to prevent him from continuing to practice the sinister acts of torture he performed on innocent victims during the war. As for Luqman, Salaam is both attracted to and a victim of his twisted acts of misogyny and subjugation. Upon the death of al-Abrass, Salaam's fiancé, she finds herself alone. Driven by her desire to get married, thus securing a place for herself in the Lebanese social structure, she turns to Luqman as a possible husband.

Through his monologues, Luqman reveals his abhorrence of her. He views her as ugly, and mentally abuses her. However, Luqman remains close to her because she provides a safe haven for him after the war. On the part of Salaam, the abuse and mistreatment she suffers at his hands are a small price to pay for the security that would be provided by her ability to adopt an accepted social role.[138] Finally, frustrated in her attempts to form a relationship with Luqman, Salaam is drawn into a sado-masochistic sexual relationship with Najib, recently released from the mental institution, which ends only with his demise.

II. Roots of Violence: Patriarchy, the Civil War and the Primitive

In *Ya Salaam*, violence is treated as an integral part of human nature that predates the war, finds new forms of expression during the bellum period when it is able to transcend the social and state controls that previously kept it in check and then struggles to maintain its position of primacy, operating covertly and therefore more creatively in the postwar period. The novel is set in this final time period, with flashbacks informing the reader of events that occurred during and before the war.

Within this atmosphere rife with suffering, Barakat brings into sharp focus the human landfill of war's aftermath: a landscape of damaged individuals who must confront and re-negotiate the violence that became a central component of their own identities during the war. Within post-war society, shifting gender roles and changing relationships between men and women as well as new expressions of sexuality in the forms of masochism, misogyny, sodomy, and sadism result in fresh manifestations of violence that still retain many of its traditional qualities because it is filtered through

---

[138] N. Barakat, 1999 29-37.

oppressive social constructs that pre-date the war. Specifically, the practice and primacy of patriarchal cultural attitudes institutionalize the sense of male superiority that perpetuates stereotypes of women as lesser beings. This misogynist mind-set continues to reinforce male privilege in society and often results in violence against women.

From the outset, Barakat mocks the idea that the war (and its violence) has, in fact, ended despite the cessation of fighting since its psychological effects continue to ravage its survivors; hence, the novel's title, *Ya Salaam* (Oh Peace!), a highly sarcastic, colloquial phrase usually used to express astonishment or mockery.[139] True peace cannot exist as long as an intense desire to exploit, damage, and kill, the most obvious and significant feature of war, is acted out on a daily basis, overwhelming the norms and structures that govern peaceful societies.

Barakat demonstrates throughout the novel that the consequences and casualties of war extend beyond the battlefields and long outlast the war itself. Indeed, those battlefields become deeply ingrained in the psyches of the war's former combatants who unsuccessfully attempt to re-establish their lives in the postwar city. The internalized realities of bloody conflict consistently surface in the postwar city as it struggles to reconstruct the prewar environment of peace.

The transition from war to a post-war society is a turbulent one for Luqman and Najib, as they struggle to exchange their war-memories of grandeur, power and their ability to tyrannically oppress and control for the more peaceful and mundane post-war environment where they are expected to conform to social norms and codes of behavior

[139] It is interesting to note that "Ya Salaam," simultaneously means "Oh, Salaam," an address to the primary female protagonist in the text. This second meaning highlights the central role Salaam plays in all of the male characters' lives. All of them turn to her during the novel to fill a need formerly met by their participation in the war. They inscribe the anger stemming from their impotency in the postwar period on Salaam's body, conflating her with the peace that has deprived them of their former lives.

as well as to the actual laws of the state. Their efforts to immerse themselves in the new, postwar society fail miserably, as they find it increasingly difficult to detach themselves from their violent, chaotic past.

A 1984 study by Archer and Gartner revealed an increase in violence in postwar societies. In "Attitude Change: Multiple Roles for Persuasion Variables," Richard E. Petty and Duane T. Wegener summarize their findings:

> Nations may come to be characterized by different levels of aggressiveness to the extent that they participate in collective violence through war. Participation in war, especially as major combatants, can cause countries to legitimate violence, resulting in an increase in postwar violence, relative to prewar levels (Petty and Wegener 329).

It is important to note that the context of civil war is of course very different from traditional warfare. In the case of the Lebanese Civil War, however, the sanctioning by religious and political leaders that wielded the power normally monopolized by a central government of violent acts functioned in a parallel, if not even more powerful, way. The sanctioning of violence by religious leaders in particular legitimates violence on an even deeper moral level than government sanctioning.

At the same time, the fact that these acts of violence were being practiced on fellow Lebanese citizens made it even easier to transfer the mindset of war into postwar society. Whereas traditional combat sanctions acts of violence against a foreign enemy and a process of analogy must occur to perpetuate these patterns domestically within one's own society after the war, the fact that civil war by nature involves the practicing of violence on fellow citizens facilitates and encourages its continuation after the war when wartime enemies are forced to live peacefully side by side after the conclusion of hostilities.

In *Readings about the Social Animal* (2004), Elliot Aronson cautions that these patterns should not solely be characterized as an increase in violence practiced by veterans in postwar societies. Rather, Aronson argues that increased homicide rates in particular, reveal "a potential linkage between the violence of governments and the violence of individuals. This linkage is mediated […] by a process of legitimation in which wartime homicide becomes a high-status, rewarded model for subsequent homicides by individuals. Wars provide concrete evidence that homicide, under some conditions, is acceptable in the eyes of a nation's leaders" (Aronson 345). From these findings, limited to homicide rates, we can extrapolate the probability of an increase in other violent acts sanctioned during wartime as well, not just among veterans but among members of society at large, as seen in *Ya Salaam*.

Violence, as Barakat suggests and as is similarly described in *The Story of Zahra*, also pre-dates the war. In this way, postwar Beirut represents a continuation with bellum Beirut while also signaling a return to a more primitive state, a state of nature, where often violent instinct rules and women are exploited because there are no social structures in place to prevent it. So here we see postwar violence stemming from three sources – pre-war social structures, the war itself and something even more primitive and basic.

In "Sex and Violence, or Nature and Art" (2000), Camille Paglia criticizes traditional feminisms that blame masculine violence purely on social structures. She argues that "society is not the criminal but the force which keeps crime in check. When social controls weaken, man's innate cruelty burst forth." It follows that the rapist, for example, and indeed any practitioner of power that involves aggression against women, "is created not by bad social influences but by a failure of social conditioning." Paglia

argues that gender relations cannot be stripped of their primal organization, so "feminists, seeking to drive power relations out of sex, have set themselves against nature. Sex *is* power" (Paglia 299). In other words, while the social norms of patriarchy certainly oppress women, the removal of all social controls and traditional influences leads to unmitigated aggression and absolute exploitation. This is highlighted in *Ya Salaam* by the increase in both traditional and more deviant forms of violence against female characters, and specifically Salaam, after the war.

In an attempt to make an honest living after the war, Salaam, Luqman, and Najib establish a company that develops chemicals to exterminate the increasing number of rats in the city. Najib uses Salaam's apartment as a workplace where he develops the chemicals. The company's failure to make a profit does not deter Najib from continuing to conduct experiments on rats and mice with new and improved poisons, providing an outlet for the cruelty and ruthlessness that he developed during the war**.** He eventually dies of the plague carried by the rats.

While working in her apartment, a sadomasochistic relationship develops between Najib and Salaam. The aggressiveness of their sexual activities takes the form of sodomy, as Salaam is still a virgin. She is intent upon protecting her hymen even while submitting to other sexual acts that violate her body in numerous ways. In this way, Salaam highlights the degree of her enslavement to traditional patriarchal norms. This is further emphasized by the masochistic role she adopts in her relationship with Najib.

Najib acts on his sadistic tendencies, which stem from his desire to dominate and inflict pain. These urges found easy release during the war but are frustrated in its aftermath, restricted to fantasies and finding expression only in his work with rats until he

starts a relationship with Salaam. As evidenced in the novel, asserting domination through the infliction of pain is what matters in the violent sexual act.

In “Sadomasochism” (1996), Sheila Jeffries demonstrates through her examination of homosexual male S/M relationships that exaggerate traditional gender roles and fetishize masculinity and femininity that “the traditional heterosexual system is an S/M romance,” based on power, domination and humiliation (Jeffries 241). She quotes John Stoltenberg, a participant in the Lavender Culture’s *Forum on Sadomasochism*, who explains that “for the genital male, eroticized violence against women results in male sexual identity reifications” (Jeffries, 243). In this formulation, the male role is always that of sadist, “top” in S/M terminology, while the female role is that of masochist or “bottom.”

A man may play with these roles, adopting either the role of sadist or masochist while maintaining the power inherent in his physical maleness. A woman on the other hand who willingly adopts the role of masochist permanently locates herself in an inferior state. The sadomasochistic relationship between Salaam and Najib solidifies traditional patriarchal structures that predate the war, while allowing Najib to simultaneously prolong the increased power he experienced during the war through this new outlet.

Like Najib, Luqman feels frustrated after the war at his inability to exercise the same kind of power that he wielded as a member of his small militia. His inability to relinquish this sense of power indicates a sense of rigidity, a stiffness in his character which is further made evident in the description of the inflexibility of one of his typical morning routines: he wakes up, curses the alarm clock, touches his penis, washes, makes coffee, and uses the bathroom. Luqman always performs these actions in the same order

and in the same way. His daily actions take place in the present, but his thoughts and feelings are still imprisoned in the past where he possessed a great deal of authority and exercised enormous power over his enemies during the war. In this way, he signals the link between his current rigidity and his status during the war. Luqman turns to his daily rituals in order to create a world where he has control – even if this world is a trivial microcosm.

David Shapiro explains that the rigid character as constructed in psychological paradigms is characterized by an exaggerated and tense deliberateness. He tends not to forget or lose himself, as he is relentlessly engaged in attaining full autonomy and self-mastery. He admires strength and abhors weakness. A protracted identification with images of higher authority resulting from childhood experiences is a major feature of the rigid character.[140]

As the story unfolds, the reader learns that Luqman left school at an early age after the death of his parents in a car explosion during the war.[141] He joined one of the political parties only to abandon it shortly thereafter, realizing that its militia failed to satisfy his personal interests and needs. Immediately after his failure to commit suicide, he decided to engage in manufacturing bombs and killing.

The reasons for Luqman's attempted suicide can only be hypothesized, as no clear explanation is provided in the text. As will be discussed at greater length below, Luqman was severely beaten by his parents as a child, which led to his low self-esteem.[142] With the start of the war and the loss of his parents, Luqman feels alienated. His initial goal in joining the political party is to find a community and try to change his

---

[140] See Shapiro 69-74.
[141] See N. Barakat, 1999 104.
[142] See N. Barakat, 1999 40-41.

nation through words and intellectual exertion. After discovering that his efforts are futile, Luqman attempts to commit suicide. It is at this low point that he finally joins the militia.

In the postwar city, Luqman finds himself poor and unemployed, living a meaningless life. Additionally, he experiences a profound sense of anxiety, disorientation, and lack of purpose resulting from living a life inconsistent with his life and the self he developed during the war days. During the war, Luqman made a living by making bombs and selling them.[143] For him, war is associated with wealth, power, status, women and indulgence in violence.[144] In this new context, he is no longer able to engage in his previous habits, and thus loses his sense of normalcy.

Luqman rebuilds his self-respect through repetitive monologues that deepen and relentlessly reinforce his memory of past violent acts by reliving them in his imagination, once again blurring the line between past and present by inhabiting both at the same time. As mentioned above, Luqman reminisces about the power he possessed because of his wealth and the violence he practiced, making others fear and respect him. Now, he is weak and no longer wealthy or able to act on his violent tendencies. In time he discovers that his memories can no longer sustain him and begins to vent his intense hostility not only through his relationships and dealings with other people but also through his

[143] This commercial side of war is also demonstrated by Najib's services as a sniper, which he hired out. Both Luqman and Najib capitalized monetarily on the war. This gave them temporary access to a higher social status, allowing them to frequent popular nightclubs and casinos and making them attractive to a wide range of women. See N. Barakat, 1999 49.

[144] Violence became an indulgence for Luqman, Najib and Al-Abrass during the war. They approached it as a luxury afforded by their newfound power and enjoyed it with the same, or even greater, relish that they did their other privileges. This is evidenced by a scene in which they torture a woman. After kidnapping her, the three friends burned her skin and her nipples and raped her for no other purpose than to derive pleasure from it. In the aftermath of the war, Najib said to Luqman: "In my life, I have never felt such desire, arousal and pleasure as what filled me that night. Even now, I can still taste her nipples under my tongue. Thus, I used to turn to that memory of her whenever sadness or depression overcame me" (N. Barakat, 1999 68). Afterward, the woman hanged herself. See N. Barakat, 1999 67-68.

interactions with physical objects in the external world. For example, he develops an adversarial relationship with the alarm clock in his bedroom, as he is being introduced in the opening section of the novel:

> Luqman opened his eyes on the alarm clock. He doesn't need it. Every morning, he wakes up just a few seconds before it goes off, exactly at the time he desires, just to spite it, to prove that he doesn't need it.
>
> Ever since he learned to make bombs, a sharp internal clock has developed inside him—one that pares the flesh of his slumber off the bones of his alertness, to order. He bragged about it in front of his comrades. They challenge him, and he scores; he always scores--on time and on target (N. Barakat, 1999 6).

It seems that Luqman's deep investment in the aggression that has become an inherent element of his personality and his internalization of former acts of unmitigated aggression contribute to his current estrangement and feelings of emptiness and weakness. Luqman's rigid behavior compels him, in the absence of the familiar environment of war, to redirect his hostility and violence toward the alarm clock and the rat in his apartment.

When the rat initially appears in his apartment, it represents a threat to Luqman's daily routine and the absolute control he exercises over his apartment. The rat emerges when Luqman is sitting on the toilet, in a vulnerable position. He fears that the rat feels like he is more powerful than him since he is exposed, caught literally with his pants down. Now he feels he has switched roles with the rat. This is used as a transition to a description of al-Abrass's torture rituals, which began with him stripping his victims naked. Here, the rat has become the torturer and Luqman has become its victim.

At this point, Luqman wishes that he had his rifle so he could kill it and "explode its skull, its blood and brains scattering like drizzle in all directions" (N. Barakat, 1999

10). Although Luqman's violent urges don't find expression in this encounter, he still directs his mental hostility at the rat, this threat to his power.

It is interesting to note that despite his desire for power over even the minutia of his daily life, Luqman fails to exercise complete control over his environment, demonstrating that other, more persistent cultural norms and patriarchal patterns are stronger even than his will to power. Luqman's apartment is extremely dirty. Piles of dirty dishes fill the sink and he puts out his cigarettes in half-full coffee cups scattered around the apartment. The filth and clutter that fill Luqman's apartment and his unwillingness or inability to clean it conform to culturally accepted gender roles that assign housework responsibilities solely to women. His resentment and frustration at his living conditions do not push him to change, as he has been completely socialized into accepting and internalizing the gender stratification of his society.

At the same time, however, it seems that on an unconscious level, Luqman also wants to keep his apartment unclean, thus rebelling against the atmosphere of reconstruction in the postwar city as it attempts to re-establish order and rebuild. The almost primitive and disordered state of his apartment is further emphasized by its lack of electricity, shut off because Luqman is unable to pay his bill. In this way, Luqman's apartment emphasizes a return not just to the chaos of the war, but to the natural chaos that lies at the heart of human nature and predates the civilizational laws and structures that organize and control it.

This natural chaos was able to re-assert itself during the war. So to Luqman, the lack of cleanliness in his apartment as well as its darkness recall the state of the city during wartime, which represents a positive association for him. To a certain extent, as

the city rebuilds itself, this filth continues to be mirrored in the postwar city as well. It thus prevents its inhabitants from returning to being completely human and mirrors the continued disorder of the city as it attempts to re-assert the laws and structures that governed it prewar and kept the primitive state of nature at bay.

From the outset of the novel, Luqman reveals his misogyny, sadistic tendencies and opportunistic impulses. He attempts to strengthen his relationship with Salaam because he wants her money, and he believes she will lead him to Lurice's money as well. He possesses a strong desire to destroy every living creature. When he discovers a rat in the bathroom, he longs for his automatic rifle that used to be the path to fulfilling his overwhelming desire to kill. The absence of the rifle emphasizes the painful loss of power and control that he felt at the war's end, marking a deep internal rift between the masculinity he practiced during the war, a model of contemporary hegemonic masculinity, and the new ways in which he is forced to negotiate his masculinity in a postwar environment that no longer values that same traits that it did during the war.[145] The end of the war led to the adoption of laws and structures that encourage the hegemony of a new, less violent masculinity.

According to Connell and Messerschmidt, "masculinity" can be defined as "not a certain type of man but, rather, a way that men position themselves through discursive practices" (Connell and Messerschmidt 841). In this sense, men negotiate their masculinities through a series of practices. Masculinities are never fixed, and their fluidity responds to changes in society, age and even social context. With this understanding in mind, hegemonic masculinity is "not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact it. But it [is] certainly normative. It

[145] See N. Barakat, 1999 10.

[embodies] the currently most honored way of being a man, it [requires] all other men to position themselves in relation to it" (Connell and Messerschmidt 832).

Hegemonic masculinity, although constantly policed by those who benefit from it, does not dominate merely through force as "certain notions of consent and participation by the subaltern groups" are implicit in its consolidation (Connell and Messerschmidt 841). Connell confirms that "the hierarchy of masculinities is a pattern of hegemony, not a pattern of simple domination based on force. Cultural consent, discursive centrality, institutionalization, and the marginalization or delegitimation of alternatives are widely documented features of socially dominant masculinities" (Connell and Messerschmidt 846). In this sense, the patterns of a hegemonic masculinity are maintained not just by those who stand to directly benefit from it, but by other elements of society as well.

For example, Salaam participates in perpetuating the regional, wartime hegemonic masculinity that values power and violence by condemning her brother, Saleem, for not engaging in acts of torture with al-Abrass:

> All [Salaam] remembers is that Saleem returned one day soaked with tears. He said he hated al-Abrass and did not want to see him after today. Salaam smacked him, smacked him with all of her strength and screamed: "Shut up, coward; you are not a man, you are a chicken. I disavow you, and disavow your disgrace, wretched slime" (N. Barakat, 1999 43-44).

While Salaam's brother Saleem is sickened and repelled by the acts of violence performed by al-Abrass, thus rejecting the hegemonic masculinity of bellum Beirut, Salaam is drawn to them, idealizing what she views as the overtly masculine qualities that al-Abrass represents. Al-Abrass's deviant behavior wins her approval, as his

actions, she believes, are both powerful and courageous, traits that she and society identify as being explicitly masculine.

Additionally, Salaam is complicit in the continuation of this wartime hegemonic masculinity through her nurturing of the militia as it develops. She brings the men trays of coffee, juice, food and sandwiches, feeding their bodies so they can practice the acts of violence that shape their identity.

Hegemonic masculinity is not necessarily in itself violent or aggressive, although it is in this case, but even when it is not men often display violence or aggression in their attempts to achieve it. At the same time, Connell and Messerschmidt explain that:

> because the concept of hegemonic masculinity is based on practice that permits men's collective dominance over women to continue, it is not surprising that in some contexts, hegemonic masculinity actually does refer to men's engaging in toxic practices – including physical violence – that stabilize gender dominance in a particular setting (Connell and Messerschmidt 840).

In this sense, while the violence of torture may not be condoned by postwar Beirut, prewar, bellum and postwar hegemonic masculinities all sanction and encourage physical violence against women.

During the war, Luqman approached the ideal hegemonic masculinity, one characterized by violence and aggression. This hegemonic masculinity was institutionalized by the war. In postwar Beirut, not only is he unable to practice the same kind of violence because of his loss of power, but the hegemonic masculinity that bolstered his activities has also shifted in the postwar environment, no longer encompassing the activities that structured his existence and gave his life meaning during the war.

To fill this empty emotional hole, Luqman yearns to perform rituals of dominance and submission on others – his desires as well as his conception of his own masculinity fueled by his violent past. In addition to the violence that Luqman practiced during the war, it is worth noting that he also encountered physical abuse by his mother as well as his father when he was a child, which influenced the ways in which he later negotiated his masculinity. As Connell argues, "masculinities do not exist prior to social interaction but come into existence as people act" (Connell, 2000 218). Luqman's concepts of his own masculinity are shaped by cultural values and social interactions dating back to his childhood.

His visceral abhorrence of women in general and of his mother in particular is evident throughout the novel, informing his relationships with women:

> All women are whores without exception. His mother herself is a whore. She beats him for the most trivial reasons. Sometimes without a reason. She beats him until blood flows from his mouth. When his father returns, she complains about him. Then his father himself beats him and ties him to a tree for hours. Why are they hitting you, Luqman? Is it because you killed a scabby cat, threw a rock at a chicken, or strung up a rabbit? Your parents like animals more than they like you (N. Barakat, 1999 40).

Not only have these incidents become entrenched in his memory, but they have also colored his attitudes and responses toward women specifically, and events in his adult life more generally, with violence and fear constantly informing his actions and thoughts. The equation of the present with the past is central here: in order for the violent content in his mind to continue to exist and re-assert itself, the past must be re-energized into the present. An anti-forgetting tendency is always effectively at work inside Luqman's psyche, and it infuses nearly all of his present actions with violence.

For example, in the scene where he rejoices at roasting the rat he has finally captured, the reader, through the vivid language of the monologue, has a clear picture of the severity of Luqman's torture rituals that he used on his victims.[146]

Luqman's hatred of women also stems from his sense of entitlement as a man in a patriarchal society and from his identification with the cultural constructs of manhood. This causes him, like Najib, to take on the role of sadist in his postwar sexual relationships with women in order to re-assert his dominance and male authority as he feels weakened by the environment of peace that has deprived him of his former power. The goal of the sadist is to humiliate his victim and make him/her feel powerless. When Luqman's desires to dominate and oppress fail to materialize, he resorts to fantasies about his former glory, using his wartime memories to organize his goals for the future.

The sadist often selects his victims from among those who are inferior to him in position or achievement and in this case identifies exclusively with the established superiority and authority of men.[147] Throughout the novel, Luqman maintains his awareness of the comparative inferiority of women to men and obsessively struggles to uphold this power disparity within his own male-female relationships, constantly affirming his superiority and dominance and the woman's relative inferiority and submission. In *Gender* (2002), R. W. Connell, argues that power remains a central dimension of the structure of gender as well as a crucial component of the masculine patriarchal system.[148]

Both in reality and fantasy, Luqman's will to power and domination is strongly associated with his penis. His erotic desires, sadistic in character, gain their superiority

---

[146] See N. Barakat, 1999 50-52.
[147] See N. Barakat, 1999 103-7.
[148] See Connell, 2002 58-9.

and effectiveness from having a penis. Penetration, for Luqman, is a violent manifestation of power and domination that allows him to inflict pain on his sexual partners, much as he tortured small animals as a child to assert his control over them. During the war, Luqman's penis and sexual arousal becomes closely associated with his gun. As an empowering tool, his erect penis allows him to penetrate the flesh of his sexual partners as deeply as his rifle's bullets did.

Often calling it "my colleague" or "my friend", Luqman elevates his penis to the level of an equal partner.[149] He frequently addresses his penis, as we see in the following scene:

> Luqman fondled his member. "Come on! Get up, colleague. I promise you a day out different from any other day." He passed a finger beneath it and jabbed it. The colleague raised his head up restlessly, and then flopped back down onto its stomach and slept. He has no desire today. It's all right! Luqman has no desire either. Perhaps he will take him to Marina in the evening (N. Barakat, 1999 7).

This act of humanizing or personifying his sexual organ has multiple meanings. First, it transforms this sexual body part from an ordinary piece of flesh to a higher being —bestowing upon it a mind of its own and a certain embodiment. In *On Language and Sexual Politics* (2006), Deborah Cameron explains that this dual process of separation and attachment, whereby the man grants his penis its own identity while simultaneously expressing his affection and bond to it, "has two possible interpretations […] one is that […] men are ruled by their genitals. The other, more Freudian is that the penis is some metonymic sense of the man – it is the 'rod of lordship' through whose symbolic power

[149] See N. Barakat, 1999 7, 23-24, 26, 36, 76, and 134.
It is interesting to note that the same problems that faced Barakat in the naming of her characters, discussed above, arose again when she sought a name for Luqman's penis. Her original selection, *rafiq*, meaning comrade, was rejected by her publisher because of the Communist connotations, imbuing Luqman's relationship with his penis with political undertones that undermined the nonsectarian identities Barakat desired for her characters. She found a solution in *zamil*, colleague, that embodied Luqman's intimate relationship with his penis.

he himself rules" (Cameron 153). Both of these interpretations are valid to a certain extent in the case of Luqman.

Secondly, Luqman's penis becomes his only social partner in the postwar city. Luqman suffers from an acute sense of detachment after the war because of the absence of a sense of community, namely the one that he cultivated during wartime. His penis is his only constant companion, who accompanied and influenced him before, during and after the war.

Third, Luqman's constant verbal interrogation of and gazing at his penis signify the fragmentation of the body through his focus on the penis as body part, rather than as part of the body. In this way, he creates an 'other' out of his penis, elevating it to the status of an equal partner. Luqman's talking to his penis as a separate ontological entity points to alienation. The body part is not only alienated from Luqman's body (his soul's corporeal home), but also its mind is separated from Luqman's mind. This is evidenced by the penis's refusal to obey Luqman's will, indicating that his penis exercises control over Luqman just as he utilizes it to express his own power over others.

Annie Potts explains the relationship between man and his penis succinctly. She says that "the relationship between man and his penis is complex: while the man's body may be envisaged as external to his self, the penis stands apart from the man. Often this leads to a battle of wills – when the penis has a 'mind' of its own" (Potts, 107). We see this in Luqman's inability to get an erection at times, despite the intensity of his desires.

However, as a source of Luqman's pride and power, his penis is hardly a separate entity. His anxiety often arises from the lack of a female object with which his penis can attain its power. What is significant here is that, like many ways of exercising or

enacting power, this one too is markedly *dependent* on something else, an other, for its enactment, i.e., it is less autonomous (powerful) than it might first appear.

At the same time, Luqman's penis measures the fluctuating degrees of his manhood in the novel. As mentioned above, Luqman often suffers from his inability to have an erection. Symbolically, this measures his loss of control and authority in postwar Beirut, as well as challenging his manhood and masculinity. When he does get an erection, it is for Salaam, who he does not desire sexually. Luqman finally succeeds in getting an erection for a woman he finds attractive when he meets Shireen, a Lebanese woman from a wealthy family raised and educated in Paris.

Upon her arrival in Paris at a young age, Shireen's father taught her Arabic to provide her with a connection to Lebanon and its culture. After twenty years, she returned to Lebanon, working for UNESCO as an archeologist. Her father pushed her to take this job in order to help rebuild the country, which had already suffered a great deal of destruction when he died before the end of the War. When Shireen meets Luqman, she has only been in Lebanon for a few months.

Shireen returned to Lebanon to fulfill her father's dream of reconstructing her homeland's history, thus rescuing it from the Lebanese population that does not seem to value its ancient or contemporary history, as evidenced by the recklessness with which they treat archeological sites and the corruption that impedes the postwar rebuilding process. Disappointed and frustrated by what she finds in Lebanon, Shireen decides to return to Paris.[150]

Luqman's successful sexual response to Shireen and his subsequent relationship with her represent a glimpse of hope for him, confirmed by the fact that he about to leave

[150] See N. Barakat, 1999 102, 143-144, 166.

his past behind him and start a new life in Paris. Alas, this is a dream short-lived, very much like his erection. In this way, the flaccid and erect penises are used symbolically—representing his overall status in the postwar era.

In *The Male Body: A New Look at Men in Public and Private* (1999), Susan Bordo asserts that "non-erect, the penis has a unique ability to suggest vulnerability, fragility, a sleepy sweetness. It's not just soft, it's really soft. It lolls, can be gently played with, cuddled." However, "the relation between the hard and soft penis often determines whether the soft penis will be cherished like a sleeping baby or derided as a flaccid piece of failure" (Bordo 44). In other words, a penis that has done its job and then gone flaccid is cherished and does not lose any of its glory in the transition, while the penis that has failed to penetrate and assert the masculine power of its owner is an embarrassing failure. Luqman's glorification of his penis is disrupted when its flaccidity refuses to rise to the occasion.

In several situations, Luqman's ability to exercise power over women through sexual penetration is weakened in nonphysical ways. While his capitalization of the socially and culturally privileged category of the masculine allows him to exercise power over his subjects, the effects of his low socioeconomic status jeopardize his attempts to benefit from the absolute entitlement that his masculinity would normally afford him. Such factors were effaced to a certain extent by the power he exercised during the war, but the return of prewar social structures weakens the power afforded him by his masculinity.

Luqman's sexual experience with the blonde radio reporter reveals that masculine power is not monolithic, and nor is a man's masculinity. Rather it shifts depending on

contextual factors. Here, Luqman fails to exert his power through sexual intercourse and finds himself instead subjected to the reporter's unexpected demands. The need to fulfill his desires is extremely powerful, demanding immediate satisfaction, but he still must yield to still stronger forces of denial. Here, while performing oral sex on the reporter, he speaks to his penis, his colleague, and expresses his desire to penetrate her:

> What if he asks the "colleague" to greet the reporter with "good morning," so he can release the built up tension and breathe?
> [...]
>
> Luqman raised his head and said: "Why don't we go to your house?" "Because I live with my family," she replied, holding his ears and returning his mouth to below her stomach. Luqman raised his head again and said: "No problem. Then we can go to my house. What do you think?" The reporter replied angrily and with a nasty edge to her voice: "My work is not over yet. At any rate, don't worry about it. You can leave immediately if you like." Luqman laughed. "Where would I go? There is no need to get angry, oh… I am at your service, my lady."
>
> The young woman implanted her nails in Luqman's back as she reached her goal and then her face relaxed all at once. She sat up and adjusted herself, opening her eyes and staring at him. When Luqman was almost on top of her, she pushed him away with her hand. "Sorry I cannot serve you. I am still a virgin."
>
> Luqman smiled, shaking his head and removing a hair that was stuck to his tongue and replied: "No problem." When he asked her to return the favor, she pulled her hair back and waved her hand in front of her face, expressing annoyance with the heat (N.Barakat 24-26).

The reporter then kicks Luqman out of the car with her leg, telling him, in a threatening tone, to forget everything. The superior status of the penis as an entity that blends desire and power together is in question here. As we see, Luqman's penis, and thus his power, is eliminated from the heterosexual encounter, demonstrating that the penetrating organ is not the only signifier of sexuality. Rather, power and sexuality are fluid in a game governed by more than just gender.

In the patriarchal society that the novel describes, Luqman is privileged by gender but is oppressed by his place within the class system as well as by his limited financial

capacity, structures that do not exist in a primitive state and were weakened by a semi-return to nature during the war. The reporter's education, middle-class association, and powerful family operate to her advantage in her encounter with Luqman. She is able to reverse traditional sexual gender roles and overpower him in the encounter.

The same can be said about Shireen, with whom Luqman develops a relationship toward the end of the novel: her education and French national background function as sources of power in her relationship with Luqman. This is demonstrated at a dinner party he attends at her home, where her guests speak English and French. Luqman finds himself disempowered by his inability to speak any language but Arabic. This language barrier represents a difference in both levels of education and class.

Eventually, these relationships that disempower Luqman to a certain extent also open up new horizons for him. In *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter* (1998), Susan Stanford Friedman unsettles the rigid boundaries of gender, race, religion, ethnicity, class, and national identity. She advances a model for investigating the diverse elements of identity by highlighting six discourses: multiple oppression; multiple subject positions; contradictory subject positions; relationality; situationality; and hybridity. She seeks to emphasize that defining identity exclusively in terms of gender entails the risk of leaving other modes of oppression unexplored and unexposed. According to Friedman, it is more precise and productive to move beyond the singularity of gender identity to include other cultural patterns of race, class, religion, sexuality, and so on.[151]

Because of these complex interactions, Luqman is forced to accept his loss of control and his behavior toward the end of the novel reveals a lessening of the rigidity

[151] See Friedman 20-21.

that had been a major part of his former identity, especially in his relations to power structures. As soon as Luqman meets Shireen, his language normalizes, losing the violence and misogyny of his former voice. He is forced to respect Shireen because of the elements of her identity, outlined above, that make her more powerful than him. Luqman's sexual interactions with Shireen are also much different than his experience with and fantasies of other women, having lost their violent edge. This does not mean, however, that Luqman views Shireen as an equal. The language of commodification that Luqman applies to his interactions with Marina the prostitute are also applied to Shireen, but this outlook stems more from patriarchal patterns than from the new violence sown in him during the war.

In addition to the sadomasochism discussed above and the weakening of the dominance of Luqman's male sexual role, other kinds of deviant sexual behaviors appear in the postwar period, such as the incestuous relationship that arises between Salaam and her mentally ill brother, Saleem. This relationship can be viewed as a natural continuation of the chaos and violence of the war. Unsanctioned sexual relationships function as a destabilizing force that attempts to contravene the societal and cultural prohibitive codes that have been reconstructed to a certain extent in postwar Beirut, thus continuing to shake the structures that pattern peaceful society and allowing subtle forms of violence and corruption to exist postwar.

During a visit to eradicate a mouse infestation in an upper-class apartment, Luqman meets Shireen and sets out to seduce her, hoping that she will help him escape the war-torn city for Paris. Shireen gradually falls in love with Luqman and marries him. Through his relationship with Shireen, Luqman makes his first real attempt at re-forming

a human relationship and restoring his own humanity. By focusing on his basic human needs, like touch, the aggressive part of Luqman's character is subdued and almost entirely repressed.

Just before he leaves for Paris, Luqman decides to pay a visit to Salaam's neighborhood one last time, as he always found it to be a peaceful place. There, he learns the shocking news that Najib has died and that Salaam has gone insane in the aftermath of Najib's death and her act of fratricide. His greed leads him to Lurice's apartment with a plan to steal her money. However, she manages to overtake him, knocking him unconscious and tying him up, while the gas from the kitchen is filling up the apartment. Luqman's entrapment and dreadful feelings of despair at his approaching end bring the novel to a close.

III. Uses of Violence

Violence is utilized in four primary ways in the novel. The first goal is to shock the reader. This goal is authorial and serves wider political purposes. The second and third goals are textual, inherent within the psyches of the characters: to consolidate power and identity. The fourth and final goal is divine, sacred intervention through extreme violence that leads finally to an escape from ingrained patterns of violence.

In the history of the modern Arabic novel as a whole and the Lebanese novel in particular, *Ya Salaam* demonstrates some of the most turbulent and disturbing scenes of violence ever written, to the degree that the capacity of the characters to damage and inflict pain on each other may sound exaggerated and unrealistic to the reader. The novel depicts people as monsters, making it difficult if not impossible to identify with them

while at the same time making it equally difficult for the reader to erase them and the atrocious acts that they commit from memory.

By stretching the absurdity of violence to the extreme with gritty narrative as well as elements of fantasy, Najwa Barakat weaves a story where characters cease to be fully human and become categorized instead as evil by-products of war's aggression: the unfortunate recipients of both male and female aggressors' desires to control, exploit, subjugate, trap, conquer, and damage their bodies and minds. By shocking the reader in this way, Barakat ensures that the suspension of disbelief of the reader is interrupted. This forces the reader to reconsider, not just literarily but also in reality, their conceptions of war and the capacity of humankind for violence.

In *Sex, Violence and the Media* (1978), H. J. Eysenck and D. K. B. Nias argue that "because of its shock value, the witnessing of extreme violence may actually result in an inhibition of aggression" (Eysenck and Nias 60). This is a process known as "sensitization". B.J. Hurwood justifies his book, *Torture Through the Ages*, a text which aims to strip torture of any glamour associated with it by showing the reality of the pain it causes, by explaining that "the book is meant to shock! For mankind must be shocked into recognizing its capacity for cruelty." In regards to torture in particular, Hurwood asserts that "we must be shocked into recognizing its essential abnormality, its expression as one of man's most sickening perversions of spirit and sexuality" (qtd. in Eysenck and Nias 60). This goal of uncovering the brutal reality not just of torture but of violence more generally is one explanation for Barakat's use of it in extreme form in *Ya Salaam*.

The other, darker, reading of the violence that dominates *Ya Salaam* is the message that the war generation, whose identities have been so shaped by violence and aggression, would ultimately be better off dead. This interpretation is supported by the divine intervention that intends to stop the violence reigning in the city by wiping it out with flood, earthquakes and plague. This theme will be explored at greater length below, but on a certain level, *Ya Salaam* suggests that the survivors of the war, rather than its dead, are the unlucky ones.

Violence is also used by characters to establish dominance, and willing submission to that violence signals complicity, thus allowing the wielder of power to consolidate their power. These negotiations of power, often enacted within a framework of asserting traditionally gendered sexual roles, are reflected in the acts of masochism and sadism undertaken by these troubled characters.

In *General Psychological Theory*, Freud explains that the root of the lust for pain that the masochist expresses goes back to childhood. It is a demand to be treated like a helpless and dependent child that the adult masochist reveals. What is more crucial here is that guilt also factors into masochistic experiences, according to Freud. There is a hidden feeling of guilt that demands punishment. The masochist assumes that he or she has committed crimes and the only way to overcome this guilt is to endure pain.[152] This is made particularly clear in the novel in the case of Salaam, whose masochistic tendencies grow along with her guilt over her incestuous relationship with her brother.

The dialectical relationship between sadism and masochism is of great importance here. As has been made clear above, Salaam is the masochist in her relationship with Najib. However, she is also the sadist in her relationship with her

[152] See Freud, 1963 192-193.

brother. Freud argues that such role reversal is common as “a person who feels pleasure in producing pain in someone else in a sexual relationship is also capable of enjoying as pleasure any pain which he may himself derive from sexual relations” (Freud, 1989 252-253).

At the same time, however, we see here an attempt by Salaam to resist the traditionally prescribed female gender role of masochist, driven by a desire to punish her brother for his violation of her body. However, Salaam is also motivated by Saleem’s desire to be punished for this transgression. In this sense, Saleem can still be understood as playing the dominant male role of sadist through his projection onto Salaam. As Gilles Deleuze explains in “Coldness and Cruelty” (1989): “since masochism implies a passive stage (‘I am punished, I am beaten’), we must infer the existence in masochism of a particular mechanism of projection through which an external agent is made to assume the role of the subject” (Deleuze 105-106). Najib, Salaam and Saleem all eroticize these power relationships, whether they are playing the role of sadist or masochist.

Paglia argues that sadomasochism is the natural outcome of a state whose social structures are beginning to erode. She argues that “when the prestige of state and religion is low, men are free, but they find freedom intolerable and seek new ways to enslave themselves, through drugs or depression. My theory is that whenever sexual freedom is sought or achieved, sadomasochism will not be far behind” (Paglia 300). Decadence, according to Paglia, flourishes in the primitive state of nature. Here, the instincts and impulses of our sexuality are acted out freely, unconstrained by social norms and structures, and sex and sexuality is inherently violent. Referring to Freud,

Paglia asserts that “family romance means that adult sex is always representation, ritualistic acting out of vanished realities. A perfectly humane eroticism may be impossible. Somewhere in every family romance is hostility and aggression, the homicidal wishes of the unconscious” (Paglia 301)

In his relationship with Marina the Russian prostitute, Luqman views his violent sexual encounters with her as acts of political violence that assert national power. Marina represents the flood of Russian prostitutes that appeared in Lebanon after the collapse of the Soviet Union to work in the postwar Lebanese sex industry. Luqman treats sex with Marina as a political act, viewing his penis as a conquering weapon and his penetration of her as an assault on not just her body, but also against the communism she represents to him. As he lies in bed after spending the night with her, “he was peaceful when slumber crawled into his eyes. He repeated gently while falling asleep, ‘Oh comrade, here I am! I won over *shuyu’ya*.’ In his village they called Russia *shuyu’ya*” (N. Barakat, 1999 8).[153]

Violence in the novel takes many interconnected forms. Physical brutality is an obvious form of violence, as demonstrated by the sadomasochistic relationships discussed above as well as the violence underlying the sexual encounters between Luqman and Marina. In addition to physical violence, however, subtle and recurrent forms of aggression and manipulation involve, for example, the usage of language.

Characters in the novel, especially Luqman, frequently use forms of verbal expression that embody aggression in the sense that they reveal malevolent intentions to inflict damage and set the stage for physical types of violence. Luqman’s verbal threats

[153] *Shuyu’ya* is a modification of the Arabic word *shuyu'iyya*, which means communism.

and accusations as well as the epithets and profanities that he constantly uses are true testimonies to the aggression inherent in his personality. In this way, Luqman constantly exposes his feelings of hostility and resentment, even when he is not actively practicing physical violence. Such nonphysical forms of violence establish control and institute fear, ultimately leading to psychological damage even if they are not followed by physical violence.

Luqman also practices nonphysical violence against women in particular by conceptualizing them as inferiors and commodifying them. His frequent accounts of his visits to the hotel where Marina works and his descriptions of her body invoke business transactions. The morning after having sex with Marina, Luqman relives his sexual encounter with her. His description of her body reveals his attitude toward her: "Marina is fantastic in the summer. How about winter? He doesn't know. She is cold and refreshing, like a sugary and minty soft drink" (N. Barakat, 1999 7). By comparing Marina to an enjoyable beverage, Luqman constructs her as an object of male desire that he yearns to consume. The transitory nature of this imagining – Luqman does not want to possess Marina in any permanent way, such as marriage – further lowers her value and worth. He is not even sure that he will still desire her with the coming of winter, rendering her not just a commodity, but a consumable as well.

Salaam is similarly exploited by her employer. During the war, Salaam's parents die in a car explosion, which drives her brother, Saleem, insane and leads to his admittance to a mental hospital. While he is in the hospital, Salaam is left alone, leaving her in a particularly vulnerable emotional position. This vulnerability is exploited at her workplace, where the director of the governmental office where Salaam is employed uses

his power to perpetuate traditional forms of gender-based oppression in his interactions with her.

Salaam's supervisor has a history of manipulating his female subordinates into providing him with sexual favors, valuing them solely for the sexual services they perform. Salaam is not summoned to his office until after she has already been working there for some time because she is significantly less attractive than her female co-workers. She is so desperate for attention and human contact that she regards his initial disinterest in her as a slight. When Salaam is eventually ensnared by her supervisor's noose of words, he verbally harasses her, asserting his dominance by practicing a kind of nonphysical violence on her, but their relationship is never consummated physically.[154]

In addition to functioning as a mechanism for asserting power and control, violence, somewhat paradoxically, also has a preservatory function. Through her relationships with al-Abrass and Najib, Salaam desperately, and ultimately futilely, attempts to carve out a niche for herself in post-war Beirut that will bring her peace of mind and allow her to create a life with some semblance of normalcy. Yet all her attempts to seek refuge in conventional relationships and traditional gender roles are thwarted, and instead she finds herself in the insidious throes of war's aftermath, drowning in a morass of devastating physical and psychological abuse, pain, neglect, and death.

The sadomasochistic relationship between Najib and Salaam is built upon wounded egos and her feeble sense of self-worth. Their violence can perhaps be attributed to their desire to protect their identities from suffering any further damage.

---

[154] Salaam soothes her wounded pride and attempts to drown her disgust in men in food. After this encounter, Salaam feeds her pain by eating. She curses men, calling them stupid, disgusting, brainless animals – driven wild by naked flesh of any kind, even if it is only a bare leg (See N. Barakat, 1999 83).

Violence manages to keep them separate by erecting a barrier that will prevent the amalgamation of identity. Sex, an extremely intimate act, involves a process of unification, leading at least temporarily to the disappearance of the individual. Introducing violence interrupts this intimacy, ensuring that the union will be incomplete and nothing of the self will be lost in the act of sex.

At the same time, inflicting pain while both partners express their joy in it becomes the organizing element that sustains and nurtures their weakened individual identities. Salaam contemplates the physical marks on her body with pride and regards them as new signs of self-identification: “she loosened up and began to be proud of showing the bruises she carried as badges and solid clues that she had been promoted in the ranks of love and affairs” (N. Barakat, 1999 114).

Barakat reminds the reader of the physical and psychological wounds that violence inflicts upon humanity in wartime, but also in times of peace. These wounds can be paradoxically healing or at the very least have a self-preservatory function, as the experienced sensation of pain salvages even the most brittle of identities from total annihilation.

Once social and state controls deteriorate, creating an atmosphere of lawlessness, and individuals find ways to continue to circumvent them even after the chaos of war has subsided and they have been put back in place, the only way to cease the unleashed innate violence of humanity that *Ya Salaam* reveals is through divine intervention.

The novel opens with a short dialogue between several clouds looking down upon the postwar city, whose inhabitants have changed radically for the worse. The clouds are astonished when they recognize that the city, because of the extreme violence that has

overtaken it, has changed so much that it is hardly recognizable and has become estranged from all other cities:

> A cloud said: "I wonder, isn't this the city that no longer resembles its former self?"
>
> A second one replied: "Moreover, it no longer resembles other cities." (N. Barakat, 1999 5).

The clouds also observe that the inhabitants of the city are no longer mourning all they have lost:

> A third asked: "Is it true what they say about its people, that they have lost the habit of crying?
>
> Then many clouds hurried forward, crowding together and looking down in astonishment … (N. Barakat, 1999 5).

The link between weeping and catharsis is of enormous significance here: where there are no tears, there can be no end to violence. In the process of mourning, profound contemplation and self-evaluation occur and, subsequently, an opportunity exists to be cured from violent impulses. In a sense, the city has become blasphemous through its population's continued irreverence towards the sacredness of human life, demonstrated by the practice of excessive violence even outside the sanctioning bounds of war.

The gathering clouds decide in the end that the city must be cleansed with their own tears. Disgusted with the scene below, they let forth the rain that will stop the cycle of violence. The impending flood, implied in the novel's final line, will wipe the city clean, freeing it from sin: "they [the clouds] looked down in farewell, and then exploded into tears" (N. Barakat, 1999 190).

The characters in *Ya Salaam* begin to approach violence in ritualistic ways that highlight its substitution for religion and its traditional rites of worship. Expressions of masochism and sadism in the novel are rivetingly portrayed by al-Abrass, the chief of

torture parties held during wartime. While performing the grisly acts, al-Abrass rejoices at the pain he inflicts on his adversaries and invites Luqman and Najib to witness and participate in the acts of torturing. His routine involves tearing the clothes off his enemies, torturing, and sodomizing them. Here sodomy strips anal eroticism from any ultimate conventional pleasure by making it purely murderous—causing pain through sex becomes the goal, not deriving pleasure.

Before killing his enemies, al-Abrass often forces his victims to strip and bathe to cleanse them from their sins. Luqman's own nakedness vividly reminds him of al-Abrass's torture rituals: "he remembered al-Abrass and what he used to do when subjecting his victims to torture. Perhaps it was his short height and weak body that gave him the idea of forcing them to take their clothes off and bathe while naked." (N. Barakat, 1999 135). In response to Luqman's queries about the origin of the bathing/baptizing torture ritual, Al-Abrass replied, laughing: "I baptize them so they can be cleansed from their sins, so they can meet their God repentant and having asked for His forgiveness" (N. Barakat, 1999 10). Torture becomes amalgamated with religious ceremonies when the torturer's God-like power is fully exercised to reduce the tortured to nothingness, the primary state of humans according to al-Abrass.

The root of the rituals underlying al-Abrass's acts of torture can be found in his Christian upbringing. After the death of his father, al-Abrass's mother raised him and tried to instill the tenets of her religion in him. He was a very good child, and so although he was born Elias, he became known as al-Abrass, after a saint whose image hung in the guest room and in fact whose picture can be found in many Christian households in the Middle East. The saint was also named Elias (the English equivalent of

Elijah), but he became known as al-Abrass, which means "albino," because he was very pale. Al-Abrass the character in the novel is not an albino, although he was blond.[155]

His mother prayed for him often, and al-Abrass managed to deceive her for a long time. However, al-Abrass's deeds revealed his true nature in time: he practiced violence rather than good deeds. Despite this, though, the undertones of his acts of torture are the religious rituals and ceremonies performed by his mother in the name of Christianity. This is clearest in his baptism of his victims before their deaths.

Rituals can also be observed in the violent sexual relationship between Salaam and Najib. Before embarking on the act of sexual intercourse, Salaam and Najib perform a series of sadomasochistic acts:

> She did not cry out when he made her stand in the middle of the room and whipped her with his leather belt on her back, buttocks, thighs, limbs, breasts and face. She did not even moan. She twisted a bit as if a gentle hand was kindly caressing her. Seeing the red and purple lines on her body never scared her. His hand did not frighten her when it extended to her hair, pulling her head down and forcing her to bow. Najib became more excited when he saw her cringe. Then he rewarded her by throwing her on the floor, lying on top of her, and smashing her head on the ground while spitting on her, increasing his joy by cursing her with the most obscene words (N. Barakat, 1999 93).

Ritualizing the violence of their relationship lends it a certain sacredness, identifying the primacy of its place within these characters' lives.

Barakat alludes to the excessive violence that the city has experienced, forcing society as a whole to revert to a quasi-primitive state. The transcendental forces or divine intervention of flood, earthquake and plague are the only remedies that remain for the city and its inhabitants to the endless cycle of selfish opportunism. As René Girard puts it in *Violence and the Sacred* (1979), "inevitably, the moment comes when violence can only be counteracted by more violence. Whether we fail or succeed in our effort to

[155] See Barakat 10.

subdue it, the real victor is always violence itself" (Girard 31). He continues, explaining that "violence is like a raging fire that feeds on the very objects intended to smother it" (Girard 31). The logical conclusion is that complete annihilation – the removal of anything that could potentially feed that raging fire of violence – is sometimes the only solution.

One of the most compelling elements in the novel is Barakat's use of rats that infest the post-war city, transforming it into a nest of disease and spreading fear among its inhabitants. As the increasing levels of violence push humanity more deeply toward a state of primitiveness, with barely-functioning law enforcement institutions, the plague also spreads randomly throughout the city.

Metaphorically, rats and the plague they carry can be understood as forces of destruction. In this reading, the rats mirror the militiamen, whose numbers multiply at an alarming rate and the plague can be linked to the violence of civil war that they spread. Both result in dreadful mass terror and murder.

It is common for rats to signify urban decline, both morally and materially. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White explain in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (1986) that as the link between physical and moral hygiene develops in a society, physical filth, embodied by the rat, begins to carry with it a deeper threat. They argue that after the development of new standards of cleanliness, "the rat [is] no longer primarily an economic liability (as the spoiler of grain, for instance): it [is] the object of fear and loathing, a threat to civilized life" (Stallybrass and White 143). In this sense, "the rat,

then, furtively [emerges] from the city's underground conscience as the demonized Other" (Stallybrass and White 143).[156]

Like that of civil war, the destructive force of rats disrupts the communal fabric of the city and breeds death and disease among its inhabitants. Even the upper classes of Beirut, supposedly safe in their fancy high rise apartment buildings, are threatened – one might argue that they are the most threatened – by rats and the filth they embody.

The role of the plague in particular, however, is not just an indicator of destruction. On the contrary, as Girard asserts, it is a form of sacred violence:

> The sacred consists of all those forces whose dominance over man increases or seems to increase in proportion to man's effort to master them. Tempests, forest fires, and plagues, among other phenomena, may be classified as sacred. Far outranking these, however, though in a far less obvious manner, stands human violence – violence seen as something exterior to man and henceforth as a part of all the other outside forces that threaten mankind. Violence is at the heart and secret soul of the sacred (Girard 31).

The plague, like other natural disasters, is a sacrificial act, a sacred violence that must occur to counteract and eventually overwhelm the fatal mischief of man. The sacred act neutralizes human violence, resulting in a deceleration of that downward spiral that would have eventually led to humanity's extinction or on a smaller scale, the complete annihilation of the city of Beirut.

The decadence of postwar Lebanese society is characterized by many different forms of violence. Perhaps the most offensive, the most in need of divine punishment and intervention, is that of incest. Further perpetuating the patterns of gendered violence and general brutality that order her life, Salaam is pressured into an unwanted incestuous

---

[156] Stallybrass and White emphasize, however, that this formulation does not return to some sort of primitive, natural identification. Rather, this re-imagining of the rat corresponds directly to re-conceptualizations of the body and the symbolic city: "the reformation of the senses *produced*, as a necessary corollary, new thresholds of shame, embarrassment and disgust" (Stallybrass and White 148).

semi-sexual affair with her brother, Saleem, at the hospital. During her regular visits to the mental hospital, Salaam allows her brother to suck on her breasts and engage in solo sexual acts, such as masturbation. Salaam often feels guilty about her behavior with her brother and attempts to keep it secret, as explored above in my discussion of the relationship between guilt and masochism.

After failing to keep their relationship secret from the hospital staff, Salaam is forced to take her brother home with her. Knowing that his presence in her apartment will ruin her relationship with Najib, she is compelled to hide him in the basement where he eventually demands more of her body. She accidentally gives him an overdose of morphine while she is trying to resist and subdue him and then abandons him in the basement to be mauled and eaten alive by rats:

> Before entering the house, she looked at the sky and found it to be the same, laden with clouds. She will forget tomorrow. Tomorrow there will be no evidence of the secret buried in the basement. Now, the rats will gather around him, attacking him, and will keep biting, mauling, tearing and eating until they completely consume him as if he never existed (N. Barakat, 1999 163).

The placement of her brother in the basement signifies an attempt on the part of Salaam to repress her incestuous experiences with him in a dark place, her unconscious. Salaam further silences him, symbolically quieting her memory of him, by putting duct tape over his mouth.

Psychoanalysts have long associated the basement or cellar with the unconscious. Carl Jung famously explained: "here the conscious acts like a man who, hearing a suspicious noise in the cellar, hurries to the attic and, finding no burglars there decides, consequently, that the noise was pure imagination. In reality, this prudent man did not dare venture into the cellar" (qtd. in Bachelard 19). In *The Poetics of Space* (1958),

Gaston Bachelard explains this trepidation, describing the cellar as “the *dark entity* of the house, the one that partakes of subterranean forces” (Bachelard 18). It is here, in the unconscious, that we hide the fears and memories we don’t want to face. The attic, on the other hand, the conscious, is represented by Lurice, who lives in the building above the basement where Salaam hides Saleem. Lurice murdered her own son, al-Abrass, in the broad light of her conscious.

We can never quite escape the unconscious, and on another level, Saleem is Salaam’s unconscious.[157] This relationship of twinning is first hinted at through their names: Salaam and Saleem. Such naming practices are common in Arab families, but in this case, it also signals a deeper relationship. Throughout the novel, Salaam voices her jealousy of her brother because he is more attractive than she is. After the war, he continues to exist as a memory of her shame, and she fantasizes about killing him.

In a Lacanian sense, Saleem is Salaam’s Other. According to Lacan, “the Other, the capital Other, is already there in every opening, however fleeting it may be, of the unconscious” (Lacan, 1981 130). The Other is characterized by its alterity, however, so when Salaam begins an incestuous relationship with Saleem, she, in a sense, uses this relationship to suppress and then destroy his identification as her Other by allowing a certain assimilation to occur.

In this sense, Saleem functions as a sacrifice. It is interesting to note that Saleem means “flawless”, “faultless” or simply “healthy” in Arabic. Saleem al-‘aqal, meaning sound of mind, is the opposite of majnun, mentally ill or insane. In this way, Barakat

---

[157] Paglia explains that “Freud’s unconscious is a daemonic realm. In the day we are social creatures, but at night we descend to the dream world where nature reigns, where there is no law but sex, cruelty and metamorphosis. Day itself is invaded by daemonic night. Moment by moment, night flickers in the imaginations, in eroticism, subverting our strivings for virtue and order, giving an uncanny aura to objects and persons, revealed to us through the eyes of the artist” (Paglia 300).

signals Saleem’s relative sanity, demonstrated through his abovementioned rejection of violence, despite his categorization as mentally ill. This state of “flawlessness” also qualifies him as a sacrifice.

Girard argues that “the proper functioning of the sacrificial process requires not only the complete separation of the sacrificed victim from those beings for whom the victim is a substitute but also a similarity between both parties” (Girard 39). In the case of Salaam and Saleem, however, the similarity between them is too great after their incestuous relationship begins and the sacrifice fails, preventing Salaam from escaping the cycle of violence. In this sense, Salaam’s sacrifice of Saleem can be contrasted with Lurice’s sacrifice of al-Abrass, her son, which does make her character immune to the violence of the city for the duration of the text.

However, Lurice’s sacrifice of her son drives her mad to the point that when Luqman appears in her apartment at the end of the text, when he is attempting to rob her, she confuses him for al-Abrass. Lurice’s madness is further signaled by the baby clothes she spends her days sewing and hangs from a clothesline in her apartment: she has not accepted the fact that her son is dead, and still believes he is the young child, Elias, who drifted away from her. At the same time, however, Lurice’s madness grants her a certain lucidity. While on the surface, her sacrifice of Luqman is a mistake as Lurice, in her confusion, thinks he is al-Abrass, who must be punished for his sins. On a deeper level, though, Lurice ensures through her sacrifice of Luqman that all three of the men who perpetuated acts of gruesome violence before and after the war have been punished. The novel closes with Luqman’s immanent death as Lurice prepares to gas him, as she did her own son. In this way, Lurice acts as a sort of higher power, maintaining justice.

Throughout the novel, heat functions as a constant and oppressive force in the characters' lives. The sky is heavily laden with clouds that do not rain, emphasizing the stifling, high temperatures and humidity of the city. Temperatures continue to rise along with the plot, emphasizing that the effect of nature is just as strong as that of the manmade environment on the violence of the characters.

In "Heat and Violence" (2001), Craig A. Anderson examines what is know as the heat hypothesis, which states that "hot temperature increase aggressive motivation and (under some conditions) aggressive behavior" (Anderson 33). This connection has long been explored in literature, and now it has been borne out by science as well.[158] The strongest and simplest argument for this relationship between heat and aggression, supported by statistics linking higher rates of violent crimes to higher temperatures, is, in short, that heat makes people uncomfortable, which in turns makes them more irritable. This is termed "the 'crankiness' notion" (Anderson 36). The flood unleashed by the clouds, and presumably God, at the close of the novel will effectively destroy both the people involved in the escalating patterns of violence as well as the environment, the heat, that intensified such behavior.

However, it is also possible to understand the ever-present heat as a product of the violence wracking the city, rather than an environmental factor leading to its intensification In this understanding, the heat in the city transforms it, along with the anarchic violence exemplified by the behavior of the novel's characters, into a hell-on-earth. Najib even exclaims to Luqman at one point: "Man, it's like we're in hell. All these clouds and not a single breeze" (N. Barakat, 1999 69). If this is the case, and the

[158] Anderson, for example, cites Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*: "I pray thee, good Mercutio, let's retire; / The day is hot, the Capulets abroad, / And, if we meet, we shall not 'scape a brawl, / For now, these hot days, is the mad blood stirring" (qtd. in Anderson 33).

characters are already in hell, then the clouds' cooling tears become an expression of mercy rather than a form of divine punishment.

Chapter Four

Mothers and Daughters: Writing Rural and Urban Sexuality in Alawiyya Subuh's *Maryam of Stories*

I. Introduction

Maryam of Stories, narrated variously by the title character, Maryam, her friend Ibtisam and the character Alawiyya, is a collection of tales woven together into a rich fabric that seamlessly incorporates the lives of three generations, represented by Maryam and her friends, her parents and her grandparents. Through these narratives, the novel demonstrates that while the details and locations of the stories may have changed, they have consistently been woven on the same frame of patriarchy and tradition that reveals startling similarities between Maryam's stories, set in contemporary Beirut, and those of her mother and grandparents, set in the rural South.

The text of the novel represents these patterns through its circularity, and the shared themes of the women's stories is emphasized by Alawiyya Subuh the author's decision to name one of her characters Alawiyya Subuh, who is, not incidentally, also an author. To prevent confusion I will use Alawiyya Subuh the author (or simply Subuh) to refer to the former and Alawiyya Subuh the character (or Alawiyya the character) to refer to the latter. Maryam, too, however, is also a part of Alawiyyah the author (and Alawiyya the character). Lebanese poet Akl Awit asserts that in the creation of this novel, "it was necessary for her [Subuh] to create from her own, living flesh a true

Maryam, granting her life as well as the right and authority to narrate and record (perhaps invent!) occurrences, events, illusions, imaginings and dreams" (Awit).

While *Maryam of Stories* belongs to the same tradition of Lebanese Civil War narratives as do *The Story of Zahra* and *Ya Salaam,* Subuh's novel is distinct in a number of important ways. First, in terms of scope, *Maryam of Stories* at 425 pages is about the length of *The Story of Zahra* (the Arabic version is 227 pages) and *Ya Salaam* (190 pages) put together. This allows for the richer exploration of a much wider range of stories, characters and themes. Subuh's vivid depiction of South Lebanon is of particular note in a literary tradition that has consistently focused on Beirut. Egyptian novelist Mahmoud el-Wardani explains in the Egyptian weekly cultural newspaper *Akhbar al-Adab*, that Subuh "presented, as had never before been done in the Lebanese novel, a special and intimate South to which the reader could extend his hand, which he could touch and feel" (el-Wardani).

Prominent Lebanese literary critic Yumna al-'Id describes the author Alawiyya Subuh as a modern-day Shahrazad, concerned not with saving her life but, rather, with preserving the details of that life, capturing "images and feelings and compos[ing] them in a way that does not betray the lived experience" (al-'Id, 2002). Awit stresses the uniqueness of Subuh's contribution, claiming that her novel "makes it possible for us to read a history that has not yet been written about a generation that was crushed by the wheels of the war and cast into the pain of indifference, forgetfulness and loss" (Awit).

Second, while *The Story of Zahra* has been widely treated in English scholarship and *Ya Salaam* caused a stir in Lebanon after its publication, neither novel has received the same level of attention regionally devoted to *Maryam of Stories*. When *Maryam of*

Stories first appeared in 2002, it immediately attracted tremendous journalistic acclaim and rapidly became a bestseller. Abdo Wazen, Cultural Editor of *al-Hayat*, the Beirut daily newspaper (published in London), noted that "from the very beginning, her [Subuh's] novel [*Maryam of Stories*] has occupied a place of preeminence among contemporary Lebanese novels that it deserved, especially after all those years of hard work" (Wazen).

II. Women's Lives between Storytelling and Writing

In *Maryam of Stories*, there are two major concurrent activities that involve the relating and remembering of women's experiences. These activities are storytelling and writing. Storytelling itself is an act of release and at the same time, of creation. In "Politics, Literary Form, and a Feminist Poetics of the Novel" (1996), Joanne S. Frye explains that storytelling is an intrinsic and vital part of human nature: "the need to narrate is an apparently pervasive human need: the need to tell stories, hear stories, read stories; the need to make sense of lived experience through setting events in narrative relationship to each other" (Frye 433).

The powers of genesis possessed by storytelling are evident in the novel's title. "Maryam of Stories" indicates a relationship of possession in which Maryam belongs to her tales, rather than them belonging to her. This is clear from the Arabic construction of the title, which is an *idafa* or construct phrase. I emphasize this point to clarify the English title, which could also mistakenly be taken to mean "Maryam whom you have heard about in stories" or something of the like. It would be much more common to say in Arabic "Hikayat Maryam," comparable to *Hikayat Zahra*, which would mean "The

Stories of Maryam". This suggests that Maryam is the stories she relates and retains. They have shaped her and now compose her.

Frye theorizes that "human beings [...] claim and define our experiences as our own – *make* them – through the stories by which we assign them meaning" (Frye, 435). An excellent example of this in this text is the story that Maryam's older sister, Suhaila, tells about her relationship with her husband. Obsessed with the idea of love and the image of it that she sees presented in movies and television soap operas, she creates a fictional narrative that structures her relationship with her husband:

> throughout the night and day, she would nod off and then awaken on her chair at the sewing machine, weaving in her eyes and imagination tales of love taken from the films and soap operas she watched and lived on the television screen. Her eyes would fly open, driving away all traces of drowsiness, and her face would beam with joy whenever she heard someone say "I love you" in an Arabic film." (Subuh, *Maryam* 138).

Maryam observes that "because of her great passion for romance, she convinced herself she had fallen in love when she married one of our relatives upon his return from Brazil one summer in the mid-sixties." (Subuh, *Maryam* 138).

Suhaila continues to relate this story to herself and others despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. For example, she only met her husband two weeks before the wedding, and the few glimpses the reader is given of his treatment of her reveal that he is not the kind, tender, loving man that she has imagined him to be. Despite these facts, Suhaila organizes and interprets her experiences in a way that gives her life meaning and allows her to cope with reality.

However, as her husband's retirement approaches, she grows increasingly anxious, worried that his actual presence will destroy the narrative that she has created and internalized through repeated re-telling. At this point, Suhaila realizes that she

actually hates her husband and goes into a panic since “his presence will reveal to her that she has not been living a love story with him, not for even a day, and will destroy what she has spent her life building and believing.” (Subuh, *Maryam*, 140). After they are forced to spend large amounts of time together, Suhaila knows that she will have to abandon the narrative that has thus far shaped her life and find a new story to structure its meaning.

During the Lebanese Civil War, speech[159] and telling stories become extremely significant. Maryam and her friends gather in her apartment to narrate and unpack the events of their daily lives. Within the context of war, they, as women, are able to discover new aspects of themselves as they transcend old boundaries and cross previously forbidden limits. This challenging of traditional structures demands disclosure and analysis, as does the simple act of surviving another day, which becomes exceptional, and therefore worthy of discussion, because of the surrounding atmosphere of violence. The element of “tellability,” why something is worth talking about, ties a tale to its immediate context. According to Livia Polanyi, a story is not recounted unless it is “story-worthy,” that is, unless it makes a point relevant to the speaker, the audience, and the world in which they find themselves. This is what is meant when she explains that “people do not talk to each other at length about matters which are not of some interest to them” (Polanyi

[159] “Speech acts” would perhaps be more appropriate than “speech” in this context, if “speech acts” are understood as acts of enunciation that are simultaneously acts of consumption and production. In *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), Michel de Certeau explains that “the speech act is at the same time a use *of* language and an operation performed *on* it”. This is because a practice of language is “indissociable from the present *instant*, from particular circumstances and from a *faire* (a peculiar way of doing things, of producing language and of modifying the dynamics of a relation)” (de Certeau 33). In this context, consumption is “characterized by its ruses, its fragmentation (the result of circumstances), its poaching, its clandestine nature, its tireless but quiet activity, in short by its quasi-invisibility, since it shows itself not in its own products (where would it place them?) but in an art of using those imposed on it” (de Certeau 31). The significance of understanding consumption as an act of production is the recognition of the transgressive, creative power of seemingly submissive acts of everyday life. Patterns of women’s speech, then, become “ways of operating,” “tactics” that although never permanent, challenge power structures at the moment of enunciation.

1). In the context of war, the simple act of surviving another day makes every moment, no matter how mundane, worthy of discussion.

Maryam narrates: "we needed to tell each other everything, even our most intimate of secrets. Each one of us needed to relate her tale in the presence of the other women, so we could become mirrors revealing her faces and ours" (Subuh, *Maryam* 9). In addition to using storytelling to interpret and understand the day's events, placing them within a narrative that gives coherent meaning to their lives, it becomes clear here that a concurrent process of witnessing occurs in this group setting that lends these narratives legitimacy. The storyteller is able to solidify her own identity at least in part by recognizing the affinity she has with other women.

The need to narrate is returned to repeatedly throughout the novel, as is the image of untold secrets or unnarrated stories as water that will drown the keeper if it is not released. Describing Alawiyya, Maryam laments that "she would only return after a long absence when she began to overflow with the water of a story she was unable to swallow" (Subuh, *Maryam* 8). The inability or unwillingness to expel the stories lodged like water in the lungs can lead to physical illness and deterioration, as demonstrated by Ibtisam. When Maryam and Alawiyya visit her, she is sickly and silent, speaking "as if her voice was struggling to emerge from the well of her chest, the letters wet with muddied water" (Subuh, *Maryam* 266).

The notion of storytelling and narration as life-saving processes dates back to *A Thousand and One Nights*, where Shahrazad, as well as many of the characters in her tales, tell ransom narratives to save the narrator or someone else's life. The invocation of water's dangers rather than its life-giving, sustaining properties complicates this

connection. On the one hand, we willingly, even voraciously ingest narratives. However, we cannot absorb the volume of tales that we greedily drink in, thirsty for the nourishment that they provide. So, the tales must be repeated, listened to by others, to purge them from our systems.

This is an important difference between the storytellers in *A Thousand and One Nights* and those in *Maryam of Stories*. While both tales present narration as being motivated by self-preservation, Shahrazad tells her stories primarily to save herself from Shahryar, and the stories are therefore directed at him and his healing, while Maryam and Alawiyya's originary compulsion to relate stems from the urge to rescue themselves from the burden of those very stories. The exact audience, then, is less important than the role that storytelling directly fills for the narrator herself, particularly during the war when even the burden of everyday events seems to weigh more heavily.

However, after the war, the reflection and remembering that accompany storytelling cause Maryam's old friends to avoid these processes, abandoning her as well as their old ways of relating to each other. While the war created a community of women, the aftermath caused them to drift apart:

> I don't know why we came to resemble a necklace, strung together by the war as it drove others apart. Then, the necklace broke, scattering the beads. Did we need each other to create a cohesive community when everything around us was being destroyed? Was it disappointment that ultimately scattered us, or was it peace that snatched each one of us into her own, private reality (Subuh, *Maryam* 9)?[160]

The hope for revolution that accompanied the war was followed by despair and disappointment when it ended without producing any significant changes in Lebanese

[160] This quote invokes Najwa Barakat's *Ya Salaam*, in which the postwar peace was what ultimately led to the isolation, downfall and demise of the novel's characters.

society, either politically or socially. Perhaps it was shame over their former optimism as much as painful memories of the war itself that caused these female characters' attempts to escape their stories. Here, willful forgetting seems to fulfill the same life-preserving function as narrating did during the war.

The second kind of relating and remembering discussed in the novel is writing, in which the experiences of everyday life relayed in storytelling are set down on paper. At least in the traditional novel, these events are structured and selected similarly to how they are in verbal storytelling. In particular, both forms share the goal of presenting a narrative, as opposed to a series of unrelated and unrelatable events, even if the coherence and linearity of that narrative is usually stronger within the novel.

Women in *Maryam of Stories* are conscious of the power of writing, recognizing in it a path to liberation from their own tales and experiences through their representation and eternal, or at least extended, preservation of their lives and memories.[161] This is why they all want their stories to be written by Alawiyya. The latter goal of preservation is particularly important during war, when life seems much more precarious. It also becomes particularly relevant in the postwar era when women, faced with a new reality, desperately seek a way to sustain the memory of their former identities and sense of self even as they yield to social pressures by rejecting their pasts and adopting traditional gender roles. As Ibtisam explains, she narrates her tale to Alawiyya in the hope that even after she has turned away from her old life, the memory of it will live on in writing: "I told her everything so my story would remain near to me even after distance had grown

[161] The great power of writing is a common literary theme, one acknowledged throughout history by the many different waves of oppressors who all turned to book burning as a security measure. These incidents are invoked during the Israeli invasion of Beirut, when Ibtisam's mother, afraid of the consequences of possessing books on literature, philosophy and feminism, burns Ibtisam's books herself in the bathroom. (see Subuh, *Maryam* 278).

between me and my life, and also so Alawiyya could be as close to me as my secrets" (Subuh, *Maryam* 283).

The former goal, the overwhelming desire to be written into history and the national narrative, seems to refute Levi-Strauss's belief that "the function of writing is to enslave" by locating a certain power in woman's representation by another, particularly if that other is also female (qtd in Johnson 238). In "Writing" (2009), Barbara Johnson confirms that

> what enslaves is not writing per se but *control* of writing, and writing as control. What is needed is not less writing but more consciousness of how it works. If, as Derrida claims, the importance of writing has been 'repressed' by the dominant culture of the Western tradition, it is because writing can always pass into the hands of the 'other'. The 'other' can always learn to read the mechanism of his or her own oppression. The desire to repress writing is thus a desire to repress the fact of the repression of the 'other'.
>
> What is at stake in writing is the very structure of authority itself (Johnson 238-239).

The 'other' in question here is of course women, and their attempt to insert their narratives into a traditionally male literary scene is an act of resistance.

It is possible to question the suitability of the novel for this project since it has grown out of a history of patriarchy and oppression of women. One can argue that these structures continue to control or at least inform writing, even when the writer is a woman. However, Frye argues that "as novelistic narrative is an agent of interpretation, it becomes as well a possible agent of *re*interpretation, not only giving form but also altering accepted forms" (Frye 435). Through its dialogic nature, the novel can challenge traditional representations of women, complicate their identities and even question

entrenched cultural norms and values.[162] Returning to Johnson, it is precisely this fear of the authority inherent in writing that has caused those in power to minimize its importance, even going so far as to demonize it at times. And it is this authority that the female characters in *Maryam of Stories* hope to lay claim to, either through representation or writing, in the case of Maryam and Alawiyya.

Alawiyya the character is a journalist. Through writing she strives to carve out a space for herself in the city of Beirut, a traditionally male urban space. She also assumes the responsibility of writing a novel that encompasses the lives and stories of other women, attempting to represent them and the histories that shaped them. As she tells Maryam after the war: "I want to write our generation's experience in the war." However, she qualifies her statement:

> No. I don't mean our generation's experience. That's too big a project. I want to write your story, because you are the shadow, the shadow of all the novel's characters, the shadow of my memories and theirs. Your character inspires me to write (Subuh, *Maryam* 10).

Alawiyya suggests that she will put together a structured, coherent narrative from what seems to be fragmented stories. What is more, she indicates her intention to focus her novel on Maryam, using her as a representative of the recurring patterns of oppression that shape the experiences of Lebanese women. Thus, she will transform the fluid orality of storytelling into a fixed big picture with Maryam at the center. This goal becomes problematic, as it threatens to gloss over Maryam's individuality and the uniqueness of her life to make her an everywoman representing the Lebanese woman's experience.

Thankfully, the actual novel that we have before us, 425 pages in length, undermines this goal, locating many affinities between Maryam and the other female

[162] Frye elaborates: "Because the novel's distinctive narrative form is multiple and flexible, it can yield an alternative notion of the human individual as multiple and flexible, rather than unitary and fixed" (Frye, 441).

characters whose stories she tells, but not blurring the line between them. The structure of the novel as a narrative form, focused on the individual, rather than that of storytelling, which requires at least two people, a storyteller and a listener, encourages this individualism. Frye emphasizes its importance to the feminist project: "the need for a sense of individual strength and agency and for the inclusion of female experience in the cultural definition of the individual becomes crucial to overcoming the cultural falsification of female experience" (Frye 440). Perhaps it is fortunate, then, that Alawiyya disappears, leaving Maryam to tell her own story.

Despite Alawiyya's intention, though, it is she who becomes Maryam's shadow, trailing her everywhere throughout the novel as she narrates. In *Woman's Body, Woman's Word* (1991), Fedwa Malti-Douglas, discussing *A Thousand and One Nights*, argues that "desire is at the root of the frame of the *Nights*" (Malti-Douglas 15). We might say the same of *Maryam of Stories*. The entire novel is driven by Maryam's desire to find Alawiyya, which is of course in turn motivated by her desire to have her story written down in a novel. The first five chapters all begin with the articulation of this same desire, with variations in wording, before Maryam continues her narration, echoing the frame story of *A Thousand and One Nights*, which re-asserts itself at the beginning of each night before Shahrazad again takes up her storytelling.

The traces that Alawiyya has left behind are ghostly, ephemeral, lingering primarily in Maryam's mind – she haunts, rather than inhabits, the novel right up until her appearance at the end.[163] Interestingly, this relationship seems to mimic that between author and reader. Frye explains that "in reading, one encounters only a text, the trail of an absent author" (Frye 622). I will return to the significance of readership and reader-

[163] See Subuh, *Maryam* 299.

response theory at the end of this section, but for now I would like to highlight that the text of *Maryam of Stories* is similarly haunted by Alawiyya the author's absence, seeming to conflate her with Alawiyya the character and perhaps further hinting at the link between them.

The attempt to preserve through writing serves three main purposes. First, it signifies an important shift from the spontaneous and social nature of oral storytelling to the literary and structured nature of writing. The writing process means these fluidly, casually and constantly told stories will go through a great deal of initial changes before becoming relatively static relics of a certain spatial and temporal context. The degree of stasis, however, is brought into question by my prior discussion of Frye and the openness of a novel, as a form of interpretation, to reinterpretation.

Even with an understanding of a text as dialogic or even polyphonic, though, written narrative by its very nature cannot have the same degree of flexibility as oral narrative. While a novel can be continuously reinterpreted, there are limits upon its re-use and re-appropriation imposed by the text itself that must be respected. Edward Said explains in "The World, The Text, and the Critic" (1983) that there are a number of ways in which "texts impose constraints upon their interpretation, or, to put it metaphorically […] the closeness of the world' body to the text's body forces readers to take both into consideration" (Said 39). In comparison, storytelling is also of course "in the world" and respects certain conventions, but it possesses a greater deal of mobility than the novel, even if the novel is not static.

Secondly, by writing a novel, Alawiyya the character seeks to carve a place for women on the literary map, which is usually charted and dominated by men. She thus

challenges the structure of authority referred to by Johnson. By doing so, a novel written by a woman about women becomes part of the cultural and literary representation of women. This allows for women's narratives to interpret and be open to interpretation.

Additionally, this premeditated and calculated act of synthesizing women's personal and social experiences becomes central to documenting a vital dimension of the nation's experience as a whole at a critical point in its history. Women may have been defeated, both by the war and by the societal forces they could not escape, but their ability to write their own defeat leads to liberation.

As Malti-Douglas explains in reference to the extended version of *A Thousand and One Nights*, in which Shahrazad's tales are written down by Shahryar at the end, "her [Shahrazad's] world is the evanescent one of oral performance. It is both measured by and linked to time: a thousand and one nights. To the males is reserved the authority and permanence of written literature" (Malti-Douglas 28). In *Maryam of Stories*, Maryam breaks this pattern by functioning as storyteller, listener and recorder, escaping the impermanence of orality and inscribing her story on the predominantly male literary tradition.

When a woman stops writing, her voice is quieted and she ceases to exist, as Maryam explains in reference to Alawiyya: "by abandoning writing, her scent vanished, as mine will vanish from my father's home and the office that witnessed my relationship with Abbas" (Subuh, *Maryam* 23). In this image, Alawiyya disappears completely, leaving not even the slightest trace, as represented by her scent, when she stops writing. We see this in *A Thousand and One Nights* when Shahrazad, at the end of the frame tale, reverts to the traditional roles of wife and mother, relinquishing the absolute yet

temporary power she held over Shahryar as the keeper of secrets, the stories that she related. Maryam elaborates:

> All scents fade away, following those who produced them as they disappear. Only the scent of memory remains if it does not vanish with the author, slipping from her nose. I wanted to tell my story so I could preserve the scent of my memories here, as this scent alone cannot depart. As for my other scents, they will vanish, ceasing to exist after I depart (Subuh, *Maryam* 48).

Thus, Maryam successfully transcends the temporary, contingent power that Shahrazad embodies by recording her stories herself, thus remaining embodied in the text, her memories, and retaining her authority even after she is gone and no longer physically narrating.

Thirdly, the process of writing entails complex procedures of editing and change that are less spontaneous than oral production. There is less emphasis on the aestheticism of stories which are continually transmitted from mouth to ear. Rather the focus is on the content of the stories or on the social themes they encompass, as opposed to the discourse, how the story is told. In the first five chapters of the novel (Subuh, *Maryam* 5-109), Maryam describes the struggle to transform women's real life experiences into aesthetic or literary representations, to seek legitimacy in the high forms of cultural and literary production.[164]

Written narratives, a novel in this case, are carefully calculated to manufacture a certain effect. Writing produces the illusion of veracity. It lends written stories legitimacy and places them above the suspicions that surround oral tales and spontaneous storytelling. After all, we turn most often to books and written sources to confirm facts and events. This is why Maryam's mother, when relating the story of Zaynab's

---

[164] Maryam herself goes along with the petty feuding between Alawiyya and the playwright Zuhair because "[she] wanted to find [her] shadow in a novel or [herself] as a character in a play" (Subuh, *Maryam* 16).

encounter with the *jinn* that left her unconscious, lends her story credibility by mimicking a written account: "she related the same story without addition or subtraction to everyone she met, convincing herself and her listeners of its veracity through its repetition. Each time, she would end the tale by pinching her fingertips together in the air as if putting a period at the end of a sentence" (Subuh, *Maryam* 29). In this remarkable scene, the recognition of the power of the written word and its privileging over oral forms of relating is made evident by demonstrating that even those who are illiterate seek authority by invoking its codes and symbols.[165]

Throughout the novel, cues invite both the fictional and the real reader to take as biography or autobiography what is, at its heart, fiction. Examples include Alawiyya's use of her friends as models for her characters and the character Alawiyya's shared name with the author Alawiyya. At the beginning of the novel, it is unclear at times whether Maryam is speaking of "real" people or of characters in Alawiyya's stories. For example, when she describes Alawiyya losing touch with her and her circle of friends and acquaintances, she complains, "she [Alawiyya] has become ignorant of our fates. For the last few years, she could only remember generalities about her characters," clearly

[165] This is further evidenced by the insistence of Maryam's mother, Fatima, that her daughters be educated, despite her husband's objections: "she who had endured hunger, would not endure his decision not to educate her daughters" (Subuh, *Maryam* 141). Fatima's interest in their education is focused on teaching them to read and write. Her husband also recognizes the power of these skills, and is fearful that his daughters will use them to challenge his power and subvert social norms, as is demonstrated by the following conversation between him and Fatima:
"- In spite of you, and of those who begot you, I want to educate my daughters. Or do you want them to grow up to be like me, knowing nothing about the world and unable to untangle a sentence?
- Fatima, you want to educate your worthless daughters so they can write love letters to boys?
- My daughters will not write to anyone. They are not sneaky. Whether you like it or not, I will educate them. And my daughters are not worthless" (Subuh, *Maryam* 141).

blurring the line between real individuals and their fictional representations (Subuh, *Maryam* 12).[166]

The limit between real stories and fabrication or myth is also repeatedly shown to be unfixed in *Maryam of Stories*. While she is relating her tale, Maryam herself explains that lying is a part of storytelling: "sometimes I discovered that I was lying. I don't mean lying in the conventional sense. Rather, I mean lying as Alawiyya did whenever her imagination imposed itself on a story" (Subuh, *Maryam* 16). Lying is perhaps too strong a word for the half-truths and fictions to which Maryam is referring that go into the creation of a story.

She later wonders, "Did Mother invent all her stories to have something to believe in? And did Alawiyya invent the end of the story so she could believe in it?" (Subuh, *Maryam* 30). In this way, Maryam implies that not just the telling of true stories, but also the creation of tales and omission from and addition to existing stories, helps to form a coherent narrative that can function as an organizing factor in our lives.

Writing a novel about female characters' lives and selves during civil war means the writing of a collective autobiography. However, the truth of its details is less important than its ability to transcend its specific conditions and contexts. In this way it gives voice to other women that are socially rendered voiceless.

Hence the purpose of writing a novel for Alawiyya and her characters is not only to preserve their life stories. It is also to perpetuate them in a way that offers a path for

---

[166] Maryam later claims to understand Alawiyya because she "is one of the novel's characters," further blurring the line between Alawiyya the author and Alawiyya the character, a duality which is now re-embedded within the text as we find that we have a second Alawiyya the author (who is also Alawiyya the character) in opposition to Alawiyya the character (although this time Alawiyya the character is a character in a fictional novel in addition to being a character in *Maryam of Stories*) (Subuh, *Maryam* 13). Finally, Maryam casts herself as well as originally merely a character in Alawiyya's novel, indicating that she has given up on Alawiyya ever writing her story by telling her audience: "I have chosen a future for myself outside of her novel" (Subuh, *Maryam* 7)

other women to understand their own experiences. Writing in this respect becomes an act of hope.[167] The despair of not writing is only a symptom of the real problem – not being read and not having one's story heard. This, then, is the source of Maryam's distress when she laments that "the first volume of the novel remained unpublished, just as my story remained unread" (Subuh, *Maryam* 11).

Frye highlights the necessity of a "feminist interpretive community" that will complete the process of re-thinking conventions and norms, including the restructuring of patriarchal patterns, begun by the author in the process of writing (Frye 446):

> Through a paradigm centered in female experience (thus raising to visibility, among other things, the previously invisible qualities of women's strength and agency) the novelistic claim to portray a view of social reality becomes a means of access to nearly shared experience and provides the possibility, through the writer-character-reader triad, for a sense of community in the new shared reality (Frye 446).

Within this relationship of complicity between the author, her characters and the reader, we can locate a more intimate connection between the three than is traditionally acknowledged in contemporary criticism.

It certainly challenges Roland Barthes's famous and widely accepted contention in "The Death of the Author" that the text should always be divorced from its author, allowing it to exist on its own.[168] In a way, *Maryam of Stories* also hints at its alignment with Barthes's argument by consistently highlighting Alawiyya the character's (who is also an author and as has been mentioned before shares her name with Alawiyya the

---

[167] Writing can be an act of hope directed at the community of women, but it is also an act of hope for the author, releasing her from personal demons and trauma, as Isabelle Allende explains in "Writing as an Act of Hope" (1989): "In the process of writing the anecdotes of the past, and recalling the emotions and pains of my fate, and telling part of the history of my country, I found that life became more comprehensible and the world more tolerable. I felt that my roots had been recovered and that during that patient exercise of daily writing I had also recovered my own soul" (Allende 43).

[168] Roland Barthes criticized an approach to literature in which "the explanation of the work is always sought in the man who has produced it, as if, through the more or less transparent allegory of fiction, it was always finally the voice of one and the same person, the author, which delivered his 'confidence'" (Barthes sec. 3).

author) absence.[169] Alawiyya the author is further distanced from the text by sharing her name with the mostly absent Alawiyya the character instead of with the narrator, Maryam.

However, Alawiyya the character's appearance in the text at the end of the novel encourages a re-examination of this initial interpretation, urging a return to the writer-character-reader triad referenced by Frye. In "Reading Ourselves: Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading" (1997), Patrocinio P. Schweickart discusses the metaphor of visiting that is often present in feminist readings of women's writings, asserting that it indicates "the tendency to construe the text not as an object, but as the manifestation of the subjectivity of the absent author – the 'voice' of another woman" (Schweickart 622). This idea of physical encounter and dialogue between the author, the text and the reader indicates the formation of a much more intimate relationship than that encouraged by Barthes. The end result is shared membership in a special community:

> feminist readings of female texts are motivated by the need 'to connect,' to recuperate, or to formulate – they come to the same thing – the context, the tradition, that would link women writers to one another, to women readers and critics, and to the larger community of women (Schweickart 623).

This is an accurate description of the project intended by Alawiyya and completed by Maryam. By recording her experiences and her characters' stories, Maryam provides a forum that acknowledges the differences between women, but recognizes the affiliation between them and thereby creates a coherent narrative to combat patriarchy and oppression.

For her part, the woman reader takes an active role. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau draws attention to the conventional understanding of the writer-

[169] See also Subuh, *Maryam* 299 for speculation on the author's murder.

reader relationship, which renders writing an act of production and the writer a producer while characterizing reading as an act of consumption and the reader as a passive consumer. Certeau argues, however, that reading is in actuality a "silent production" in which the reader interprets the text and inserts into it his or her own experiences and memories. Accordingly, the reader "insinuates into another person's text the ruses of pleasure and appropriation: he poaches on it, is transported into it, pluralizes himself in it like the internal rumblings of one's body". Certeau compares the text to a "rented apartment" and asserts that "a different world (the reader's) slips into the author's place" (de Certeau xxi). In this way, the reader creates, if only temporarily, a new production from the text.

While Certeau allows us to understand how the reader can play an active and creative role in reinterpretation, it is important to return to his concept of the reader's "different world". In women's readings of male authors' texts, this act of appropriation permits subversion of patriarchal structures and contrapuntal readings. In feminist readings of female author's texts, the "different world" of the reader may in fact have many commonalities with the author's world or the characters' world, nurturing a sense of community and kinship over one of difference even while respecting the integrity of the text, the author and the reader.

In order for this process of affiliation and community formation to most fruitfully occur, the text should be a feminine text, not just a text written by a woman author. In "Castration or Decapitation" (2000), Hélène Cixous clarifies that a feminine text is not necessarily a text written by a woman. Texts written by men may be feminine, and texts written by women are often masculine (Cixous, 2000 240). According to Cixous:

> a feminine textual body is recognized by the fact that it is always endless, without ending: there's no closure, it doesn't stop, and it's this that very often makes the feminine text difficult to read. For we've learned to read books that basically pose the word 'end'. But this one doesn't finish, a feminine text goes on and on and at a certain moment the volume comes to an end but the writing continues and for the reader this means being thrust into the void (Cixous, 2000 241)

Although the whole novel can be characterized this way to a certain extent, chapter six[170] is a particularly glowing example of a feminine text. What makes *Maryam of Stories* and chapter six in particular endless, and therefore feminine, is the signifying chain that creates a narrative that is both circular and has limitless associative permutations. Maryam's narration, this enlightening and unapologetic glimpse into her unconscious, ends when it does because as Cixous explains, the volume, or in this case, the chapter, ends.

Throughout the novel, the stories bleed into each other relatively seamlessly, but in chapter six there is an exceptionally pronounced emphasis on transitions that allows a large number of very loosely linked stories to be related as a single narrative. Maryam accomplishes this by turning the chapter into a "signifying chain," where an element at the end of each story invokes the beginning of the following story.

For example, a story about Um Yusuf, a woman from the village, and her husband ends with her saying to him, "at your service" (Subuh, *Maryam* 242). After several lines, the next story, about the relationship between Abu Yusuf, Um Yusuf's husband, and Nabiha, begins with him saying the same line to Nabiha. In addition to the words themselves, the intention behind them is the same in the two examples: both Um Yusuf and Abu Yusuf use this phrase to express their affection for and devotion to the addressee. Similarly, the story of Nabiha and her mother ends with "and she would

[170] See Subuh, *Maryam* 111-256. This entire section is printed in bold type, highlighting its status in a way as a novel within the novel.

answer her mother with *unshed tears in her eyes*" and the next story, returning to Um Yusuf and Abu Yusuf, begins with "Um Yusuf did not allow Abu Yusuf to glimpse the *stifled tears in her eyes*" (Subuh, *Maryam* 252, my emphasis). Again, not only do this ending and this beginning talk of tears, they also invoke them in the same way: stifled tears make reference to tears that indicate the tearing individual's sadness or distress to the reader, but do not fall and reveal these emotions to other characters in the story.[171]

In *Écrits: A Selection* (1977), Jacques Lacan expands upon Saussure's work in his discussion of the signifier and the signified, arguing that "no signification can be sustained other than by reference to another signification" (Lacan, 1977 150). This creates a signifying chain, which is linear and metonymic when it is "oriented in time" (Lacan, 1977 154). Lacan also compares the signifying chain to "rings of a necklace", making the signifier "a ring in another necklace made of rings" (Lacan, 1977 153). In this understanding, the signifying chain is a relatively random selection of signifiers that is just one example of innumerable possible constructions. This second interpretation renders the signifying chain circular and metaphoric, linked by associations. Lacan explains that in both cases "all discourse is aligned along the several staves of a score" so that "there is in effect no signifying chain that does not have, as if attached to the punctuation of each of its units, a whole articulation of relevant contexts suspended 'vertically', as it were, from that point" (Lacan, 1977 154).

Although in this section, Lacan's focus is on language, Bruce Fink explains the link between the signifying chain and the unconscious. He argues that

---

[171] For another example of this style outside of chapter 6, see Subuh, *Maryam* 368. Here, Zeina's story ends with the word "hitting," which then becomes the link to the opening of the next story about her brother, Hammoudi.

> the unconscious *cannot* forget, composed of 'letters' [signifying chains] working, as they do, in an autonomous, automatic way, which preserves in the present what has affected it in the past, eternally holding onto each and every element, remaining forever marked by all of them (Fink 183).

In this way, we can understand many of the connected stories in *Maryam of Stories*, especially those found in chapter six of the novel, as rare, unintentionally revealing glimpses into signifying chains of Maryam's unconscious. Of course there are numerous paths that this narrative could have taken, but the stories are all clearly associatively linked, emphasizing the circularity of her narrative, which makes it a feminine rather than a masculine text.

This aspect is further emphasized throughout the novel by Alawiyya the character-author's relationship to Zuhair the playwright. During the war, they agree to write the same story about the same characters, but she intends to begin her novel with "and" while he will start his play with a comma. It is worth noting here that the Arabic word for comma is *fasila* (from the verb *fasala*: to separate) or *fariza* (from the verb *faraza*: to set apart or isolate). Indeed, Zuhair's comma functions as a barrier, ensuring the creation of a masculine text that separates one reality from another, functions on the principles of exclusion and linearity and guarantees the integrity of each character's identity and personal history. Zuhair's inability to find and secure in writing one version of the truth and reality, however, leads to madness. As Maryam explains, "Zuhair's protagonist begins as a communist one night, and falls asleep as such. But when Zuhair visits him the following morning, he discovers that he has become a banker or a shoe seller" (Subuh, *Maryam* 307). Unable to accept this fluidity, Zuhair has a break down.

Alawiyya's focus on "and," in contrast, emphasizes the inclusion of many different lives and stories and numerous realities within her text. It draws attention to the

shared nature of each character's story – a story may belong to many characters, as Maryam and Alawiyya demonstrate, and this principle of community and affiliation creates a circular, feminine text. However, just as the comma is Zuhair's undoing, Alawiyya's commitment to the "and" creates a similarly impossible task – Alawiyya simply cannot include every story, or every possible associative permutation, in her novel. At the same time, her characters grow frustrated with her inability to distinguish between them. Ibtisam narrates, for example, that "as I listened to her read a draft of the novel, I would go crazy and be pained hearing my story wander, becoming entangled with other characters' stories" (Subuh, *Maryam* 284). Alawiyya herself asserts that such distinction would have been impossible, because she heard the same story over and over again from different women.

Her characters also pressure her to construct linear narratives in their names. Alawiyya complains that "they inserted themselves into my life and troubled my solitude, crowding my head for many years. They grew restless, demanding beginnings and endings I had never heard before. I can barely remember the beginnings of my own stories" (Subuh, *Maryam* 300). As noted above, this lack of clear beginnings and endings is a vital element of a feminine text. These factors cause Alawiyya to have a mental breakdown, which mirrors Zuhair's and is evident in the text of *Maryam of Stories*.

While within the novel we can recognize the polyphony embodied by the many different narratives related by Maryam and by the characters themselves, it is also possible to re-read the text as an expression of this polyphony within Alawiyya, where it becomes psychic fragmentation, a sort of schizophrenia. Alawiyya states, "Perhaps I have heard names and stories that resemble those of the characters. For all women are

pregnant with the same stories, and perhaps the story of one fetus in one womb is the same story that is in all women's wombs" (Subuh, *Maryam* 300-301). This cue points to the possibility that *Maryam of Stories* is Alawiyya's story – that she is Ibtisam, Yasmeen and all of the other women whose tales make up the text. And if that is the case, she is also the most prominent narrator, Maryam, and is therefore in search of herself throughout the novel.

The hint that Alawiyya the character-author is also Alawiyya the author is inherent in Maryam's final description of her in the final paragraph of the novel:

> She was not sure of anything.
>
> The only thing she was sure of was that her hand ached as she rewrote what she was reading in hope of finding an answer. She rubbed her left hand, with which she writes, and felt its warmth. But she was not sure of anything.
>
> She was not sure of anything (Subuh, *Maryam* 426).

Alawiyya has clearly been writing. We can never be sure that what she was writing was this novel. However, it is possible to hypothesize that since Alawiyya and Maryam are mirrors of each other, Maryam's repetition of the stories that are in the end all women's stories revives Alawiyya the author.

Throughout the novel, there is a desperate search for Alawiyya the character. There are even references indicating that she may be dead. Therefore, Maryam's persistence in narration rejuvenates Alawiyya the character who assumes the role of the writer in the novel, taking up the writing of her novel once again. This unifies the novel being written inside the text with the physical novel between our hands. The transition from storytelling to writing has been completed.

In this sense, then, we can understand *Maryam of Stories* as Alawiyya the author's search for her own story, which as she concedes, can never be hers alone. In this

way, she is able to negotiate her internal fragmentation. In *The Mad Woman in the Attic*, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar describe the process by which the woman author creates both a heroine (Maryam) and a madwoman (Alawiyya the character). However, "by projecting their rebellious impulses not into their heroines but into mad or monstrous women (who are suitably punished in the course of the novel or poem), female authors dramatize their own self-division, their desire both to accept the strictures of patriarchal society and to reject them" (Gilbert and Gubar 78). The madwoman, then, becomes the author's double – making Alawiyya the character Alawiyya the author's double. Gilbert and Gubar argue that in this way, "female authors can come to terms with their own uniquely female feelings of fragmentation, their own keen sense of the discrepancies between what they are and what they are supposed to be" (Gilbert and Gubar 78).

In *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Psychoanalysis* (1986), Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari treat schizophrenia as a positive process of rhizomatic expansion and deterritorialization that leads to multiplicity, and is only described as madness because it successfully manages to think beyond current boundaries. While this characterization ignores the clinical reality of mental illness, it allows for a new process of becoming, rather than of being. The end result is "not a promised or a pre-existing land, but a world created in the process of its tendency, its coming undone, its deterritorialization…where the person who escapes causes other escapes, and marks out the land while deterritorializing himself" (Deleuze and Guattari 307). In this way, we can understand Alawiyya's psychic fragmentation, her schizophrenia, as contributing to the femininity of the novel as it is a process of deterritorialization that dissolves former boundaries and

successfully opens new channels, creating a constantly evolving space for a becoming community.

The form of chapter six in particular and to a lesser extent the novel as a whole further encourages my reading of it as a feminine text due to Cixous's second condition: "a feminine text starts on all sides at once, starts twenty times, thirty times, over" (Cixous 241). Through the use of the embedded storytelling technique, Maryam accomplishes this by frequently inserting new stories into the overall framework of the novel, creating a plethora of beginnings.

Linking the circularity of narration to the feminine is a natural step as it mirrors the cyclical nature of femaleness. In "Sex and Violence, or Nature and Art," Camille Paglia argues that female identity is inextricably linked to nature: "nature's cycles are woman's cycles. Biologic femaleness is a sequence of circular returns, beginning and ending at the same point" (Paglia 305). Narratives of evolution and apocalypse, then, are strictly masculine since "woman does not dream of transcendental or historical escape from natural cycle, since she *is* that cycle" (Paglia 305). It is natural, according to Paglia, that feminine narratives reflect female nature.

In addition to narrative form, a number of thematic elements enforce the association of woman with nature, as well as the femininity of the text. When they arrive in the city in their move from the village, Fatima, Maryam's mother, registers her new environment by observing the moon:

> In the village, she would converse with it [the moon] and it in turn would converse with the sky and the mountains with its smile, which would begin as a thread that would fill its mouth as it grew until it became full. In the city, it disappears, appears again, grows bigger and then diminishes without anyone noticing it (Subuh, *Maryam* 129).

Here, Fatima recognizes the disconnect between people and nature that exists in the city. In the village, the people are constantly aware of the moon's "smile", a reference to the phases that are so important to survival in an agricultural society. In the city, however, only the women remain linked to the moon by their monthly menstrual cycles, as evidenced by Fatima's constant awareness of it in her dreams.[172] Whenever Fatima is pregnant and dreams of the moon, it heralds the arrival of yet another girl.[173]

Fatima's awareness of the connection of her body to nature is further emphasized by her behavior during her pregnancies. According to Paglia, "organically, it [the female body] only has one mission, pregnancy." When it succeeds in achieving this goal, "the pregnant woman is daemonically, devilishly complete. As an ontological entity, she needs nothing and no one" (Paglia 306-307). When Fatima is pregnant, she undergoes this transformation:

> When Mother would get pregnant, she would retreat into her body, closing the door to the outside world behind her, so she could nurture a relationship with the soul forming inside of it. That soul would make her entire body not like a body. Rather, it became a delicate, transparent spirit wrapped around the spirit developing inside of it (Subuh, *Maryam* 172-173).

This intimate relationship between Fatima and her body is juxtaposed with Maryam's reaction to her own pregnancy. Faced with no real options, she gets an abortion, comparing herself to the city of Beirut, which had "with its buildings and inhabitants aborted all of its dreams" (Subuh, *Maryam* 272). Here we see that Maryam, like her mother, yearns for the pregnancy that will complete her biologic femaleness, just as the

---

[172] "Mother's moon, the one that visited her in her dreams, remained the same, waxing and waning along with her dreams. It would tell her everything in her dreams" (Subuh, *Maryam* 129).
Paglia notes that "woman's body is a sea acted upon by the month's lunar wave-motion. Sluggish and dormant, her fatty tissues are gorged with water, then suddenly cleansed at hormonal high tide. Edema is our mammalian relapse into the vegetable" (Paglia 306).
[173] See Subuh, *Maryam* 116 and 167.

city desires to give birth to a new reality. Patriarchal society will not however permit the birth of either a child to an unwed mother or a new tomorrow to the city. Both the city and Maryam are forced into perpetuating the current patterns.

The highlighting of Fatima's relationship with the moon and her own body during pregnancy emphasizes the patterns embodied in the text itself and further confirms its feminine nature, and its ability therefore to participate in the community-forming, healing triad of writer-text-reader.

III. Writing Urban Sexuality

Writing is a liberating act, as discussed above. It allows the female author to rebel permanently against social norms and boundaries by inserting a concrete narrative into the body of representations. In this sense, it can be contrasted with the act of sex. When practiced in certain contexts, sex is also an act of rebellion. Sexual desire is regulated by a culture that privileges men. Therefore sex willingly practiced by women outside of conventional boundaries as an expression of desire becomes an act that tries to move beyond those systems, attempting to loosen the patriarchal grip on sexualized bodies. However, it does not have a lasting effect on societal structures and traditional limits.

Although sex can be a powerful and liberating act in the moment, its impact passes away as soon as it is completed. It leaves patriarchal structures, though briefly shaken, still firmly in place. On the other hand, writing about sex is a constructive means of challenging these structures. Writing embodies a fleeting act in text and infinitely prolongs what was in reality only a brief period of intercourse.

In the chaos of war, social policing structures break down. This allows women to escape the kind of close supervision that prevents casual sexual encounters during times of peace. Women do obtain more sexual freedom during the war and experience feelings of independence associated with it. However, the liberating effects of these acts do not seriously alter the patriarchal structures underlying social norms.

In addition to the acts of sex practiced illicitly during the war, women also find that they are able to survive and thrive without forming traditional relationships with men. Afterwards, however, as traditional norms and structures re-assert themselves, women "liberated" during the war desperately retreat into patriarchal structures.

After the war, Maryam's socially and politically liberal revolutionary friend Ibtisam, for example, "found herself overcome by romantic feelings that she had once considered reactionary" (Subuh, *Maryam* 80). She suggests that while her fellow male revolutionaries only suffered one defeat during the war, she and the other women were defeated twice.

Ibtisam elaborates on the double defeat that women of her generation experienced during the war, indicating that women were defeated in politics but in love as well while trying to carve new spaces for their bodies, emotions and dreams. She wonders whether their disappointments were greater and more numerous than those of the men who they thought considered them their equals.[174]

She therefore resolves to marry Jalal, a man she does not love, justifying it by telling Maryam:

> Isn't family more important than love, now that love is gone and we were defeated in everything? Oh, Maryam, do you want me to stay

[174] See Subuh, *Maryam* 80.

> ‘out’? Outside of all the circles of belonging, outside of my own life? What will I do if I don’t marry? Do I have the strength to fall in love again, diving into a relationship that will cast me into another unknown (Subuh, *Maryam* 83)?

Ibtisam had been in love during the war with a Christian, Kareem. He leaves her after he is kidnapped several times, deciding that he must marry someone from his own religion. She is still a virgin when she has sex with Kareem for the first time. He is amused by this, assuming that since she is socially liberal she has had many sexual partners.

Despite her political leanings, however, and aspirations for liberation, when Kareem says to her after sex that “Do you know, when I’m on top of you I feel like I’m in control of you,” Ibtisam replies, “Sure, that doesn’t bother me. It would never make me mad to feel you’re in control of me because you’re on top of me. It makes me happy” (Subuh, *Maryam* 94).

Even during the act of rebellion, practicing sex outside of marriage with a man from another religion, Ibtisam still fails to escape her yearning for traditional patriarchal structures. Pondering the lack of true gender equality even within the structure of the revolutionary struggle, Ibtisam later asks, “I wonder if the freedom fighters always saw us as imported whores, preassembled in our revolutionary packaging” (Subuh, *Maryam* 80)? It is likely that the relationship fails in part because of Ibtisam’s efforts to fit a non-traditional relationship that exists outside the limits of accepted social conduct into the traditional structures of marriage.

In their youth, the war generation, such as Ibtisam and Maryam, see the city as a site of liberation where they will escape the bonds that held their mothers and grandmothers in check. With the end of the war, however, they realize that nothing has

changed and the entrenched structures of patriarchal society run as deep as they ever did in generations past. As Ibtisam explains to Maryam after she decides to marry Jalal for the sake of marriage rather than for love:

> When we are young, we think that tomorrow when we wake up we will find the world as we imagine it, just as we dreamt it to be as we slept. Then the days roll by and we wake up to discover that we are the ones changed, while the world has remained the same (Subuh, *Maryam* 103).

Even during the war when women were able to enjoy a greater amount of sexual freedom, Maryam's tales reveal that the subtext was almost always one of exploitation. Though Kareem seemed to genuinely love Ibtisam, part of his attraction to her during sex was the idea of possessing her. We see something similar in Maryam's relationship with Abbas, a married man who works at the same office as her.

Their relationship begins after a round of heavy shelling when Maryam goes to the office to collect her salary. Leaving her apartment and entering the city, Maryam describes her impressions: "I felt as if I were descending into an enclosed void filled with water, like the water in our village well" (Subuh, *Maryam* 31).

As discussed above, water in the text is often associated with secrets or stories that must be shared or regurgitated for the keeper's survival. Entering the city at war is compared to climbing into the well. It is filled with the possibility of death as well as secrets that will have to be told for her own survival.

What draws Abbas to Maryam is his ability to exploit and dominate her. Maryam narrates: "I began talking about my weakness and how I felt unprotected and completely vulnerable. It was as if I were handing him the keys, entrusting them to him, without pausing to ask, 'Why him?'" (Subuh, *Maryam* 33). Abbas uses Maryam as a mirror in

which he can see the image of himself that he desires reflected.[175] There is nothing about Maryam that draws him in except for her ability to make him feel a certain way.[176] Due to her weakness, Abbas is able to use Maryam as a blank slate upon which he can forcibly project the image of himself that he desires, much as Hashem and Majed try to do to Zahra in *The Story of Zahra*.

Maryam, on the other hand, enters the relationship as an assertion of life in a war-torn city full of death. Sex here is juxtaposed with the violence of war. While sex may still be a form of violence against women as it is practiced in the novel, it is more familiar than the violence taking place in the streets of Beirut. Sex as a celebration of life in contained rooms becomes a tool with which to balance the death and destruction brought about in the public spaces – the streets.

In addition to using sex itself as a method of escape and a celebration of life during the war, Maryam and Abbas utilize language in conjunction with their sexual encounters to further distance themselves from the chaos of the war outside by creating another world from the raw material of language. Maryam explains that "we escaped from the war, the world, and death to speech. We began love with words, then we reached the mountain tops of language and desires, as if we didn't know each other except at their peaks" (Subuh, *Maryam* 319).

This is accomplished through the powerful process of naming: Maryam and Abbas play a game of re-assigning the names of body parts. So, for example, the nose becomes the penis and the ear becomes the vagina. In this way, they free themselves from social and cultural taboos, retreating into language as a performative medium of

---

[175] "He needed me so he could draw the picture of himself that he desired in my eyes" (Subuh, *Maryam* 36).

[176] "Abbas, who loved my weakness and my love for him more than he loved me" (Subuh, *Maryam* 36).

expression and an alternative interpretive world. It is also a source of healing and pleasure. Describing the experience, Maryam relates that "we celebrated our bodies, while the world outside the hotel room grew ugly. We escaped from it into our bodies. Each word grew into a world of meanings and so did every touch" (Subuh, *Maryam* 321). Narrating the story of their sexual encounter effectively creates an alternate reality. Furthermore, the story about the experience and the new language in which it is told lives longer than the experience itself.

After the war is over Maryam's relationship with Abbas ends. She then enters the more conventional relationship of marriage with Amin. As she narrates the story, Maryam is making plans to join him in Canada.

As I have demonstrated, both Ibtisam's relationship with Kareem and Maryam's relationship with Abbas, although sexually liberating in the sense that they are able to enjoy sex outside of traditional social structures, still preserve patriarchal norms of exploitation, as demonstrated by both Abbas and Kareem's attraction to Ibtisam and Maryam's submissiveness. Furthermore, both Ibtisam and Maryam seek refuge in a traditional marriage following the close of the war, demonstrating that even the limited sexual freedom that they experienced in a time of chaos did not permanently alter societal expectations nor dissolve temporarily repressed boundaries. On the surface, then, it would appear that all attempts at sexual liberation and empowerment failed.

However, we can identify a victory and a site of hope once again in women's writing. Maryam's narration of sexual scenes and erotic encounters creates a permanent record that survives the exploitation, brief pleasure and temporary release of sexual acts.

In “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1997), Hélène Cixous characterizes the power inherent in this writing:

> By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display […] Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time. […]
>
> To write. An act which will not only ‘realize’ the decentering relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs (Cixous, 1997 350-351).

By exploring in writing sex, her pleasure and her body, which has traditionally been taboo (in fiction of course but more importantly in physical reality), woman challenges the social rules and disrupts the cultural systems that strive to keep sex cloaked in secrecy. This is especially true of sex outside of marriage.

Of course even within oral expression women find subversive ways of talking about sex, transcending boundaries that prohibit this kind of discussion to covertly converse on the topic, even with men. For example, Maryam’s cousin, Nabiha, constantly expresses her sexual frustration as a middle-aged virgin by indirectly, and no doubt unconsciously, talking about sex. She follows everything she says that could be misconstrued as sexual innuendo with “no sexual meaning intended”.

For example, during a conversation with Abu Yusuf the butcher, she says: “No sexual meaning intended - take it from the bottom, or wherever you like it. Insert the knife and cut it. You know where to find the tender meat, no sexual meaning intended” (Subuh, *Maryam* 243). Nabiha’s repeated insistence of her modesty, however, is not limited to her interactions with men. Maryam relates that: “when she says ‘long’, she follows it directly with ‘no sexual meaning intended’ and when she says ‘round’ or ‘wide’ or ‘this thick’, she also says ‘no sexual meaning intended’. When she says ‘it’s

this big' or 'it went in' or 'it came out' or 'it stood up', or 'it opened', she automatically adds 'no sexual meaning intended'" (Subuh, *Maryam* 44).[177]

However, Nabiha's eagerness to constantly assure the listener that she intends no second meaning undermines her goal by highlighting the frequency with which she thinks of sex – it is always in the background. It also makes the person she is speaking with recognize the sexual nature of her words and think of sex, infusing even the most basic conversations with her sexual tension and desires.

In *Language and Sexuality*, Deborah Cameron and Don Kulick draw attention to the significance of the "not-said" or the "unsayable" in discussions of sex and sexuality, arguing that desire is not always presented clearly from a linguistic standpoint (Cameron and Kulick 13). In this case, Nabiha's vocal denials of the sexual innuendos that underlie her speech have the professedly undesired effect of drawing attention to her own, socially forbidden desires. The fact that she does have these desires is later confirmed by the sexual relationship she initiates with Kameel, the village idiot.

Cameron and Kulick assert that: "the refusal to acknowledge particular relationships and desires does not make them disappear. On the contrary, disavowal is a means of maintaining relationships and sustaining desires, even ones that we do not explicitly recognize" (Cameron and Kulick 118). In this way, the repressed nature of

[177] Maryam's mother, Fatima, has a similar interaction with a plumber who comes to fix a pipe in the bathroom. As they discuss the pipe, both Fatima and the plumber are careful to communicate that there is no second meaning to their words, also using the phrase "no sexual meaning intended". While smoking and fixing the pipe, the plumber stares at her while her body trembles with the need to diffuse the sexual undertones of the conversation. As the scene progresses and Fatima hastens to emphasize her chastity, the young plumber becomes more explicit in his language, comparing the connection of two pipes to the relationship between a man and a woman's sexual organs.

At this point, the highly sexualized implications of language use become arousing to the young plumber. Afterward, he locks the bathroom door to masturbate. The atmosphere created by language combined with the tangible pair of Maryam's underwear that he finds on the bathroom floor set an irresistible scene for him, demonstrating that performative language alone has an erotic power that can easily lead to physical sexual activity (see Subuh, *Maryam* 44-45).

Nabiha’s desires does not make them vanish. Rather, they are transferred to her unconscious and continue to manifest themselves through her speech, causing her to repeatedly violate the taboo of speaking about sex.

These restrictions on expression are synonymous with a desire for women’s silence and the exclusion of female voices from political and cultural discourse. Oral resistance to these patriarchal codes is effective, but like the act of sex itself, fleeting. In comparison, the act of writing about sex allows women to permanently enter the domain of representation—giving voice to the voiceless. By re-evaluating the patriarchal order that has for so long monitored and controlled sex, sexuality and desire, women successfully challenge social norms and force their readers, both male and female, to do the same.

In the novel, women are frequently represented in sexual scenes as objects of desire (desired subjects) not desiring subjects. Even if they reveal themselves at times to be desiring subjects they face obstacles to true subjectivity. This is a result of their socially and culturally assigned traditional roles as the submissive receiver of sex, rather than as an active participant in the act. However, this very passivity described in many sections in the novel is often understood as a story to be told, either through oral storytelling by Maryam or a novel written by Alawiyya the character.

The transformation of exploited object into active, relating subject signifies a move from desired object to desiring subject. The desiring subject writes or relates the experience as a means of empowerment— finding pleasure in the writing process or in telling the story. While these characters may belong to the traditionally constructed category of women, by writing or having their stories written, these women becomes part

of a category that is powerfully and traditionally associated with men as active agents of literary and cultural production. It is in writing, then, that women forcefully question social norms, re-interpret their own experiences and become free.

I suggest that it is the style in which *Maryam of Stories* is written that grants its female characters a true path to liberation. As discussed above, *Maryam of Stories*, although clearly a written text, is related in an oral storytelling style of embedded stories that echoes that of *A Thousand and One Nights* and contributes to its characterization as a feminine text. The flexibility of this framework allows multiple narratives, including various versions of the same narrative, to exist coherently in a single text, as they live, breath, change and interact with each other.[178] Writing, on the other hand, even in this most fluid of articulations, is the eternal imprisonment of one version of each story. It is a form of death, but only in the way that a birth is also a kind of death.

Different and conflicting versions of the same tales all exist together in oral storytelling. When Maryam or Alawiyya gives birth to the account in this novel, creating a whole life, some of the conflicting narratives pass away. So while we celebrate the many voices that speak in *Maryam of Stories*, we will be forgiven for taking a moment to mourn those narratives that were silenced in its creation.

---

[178] Although our focus here is on women's storytelling, this aspect of ambiguity is also revealed in the story told by Maryam about her Grandfather who returns from America with a tin of gold. He tells two versions of the story of how he came to be in possession of the tin of gold. They are the same except the role of the two characters in the story other than him is reversed. A number of years go by until "he himself got lost between the two versions of the story, and could no longer remember the true secret of the tin of gold after telling the same story many times, changing only the roles played by its protagonists" (Subuh, *Maryam* 130). According to Maryam, "his listeners believed both versions of the story without any question," allowing the competing narratives to exist simultaneously (Subuh, *Maryam* 131).

Another example of this is the two competing narratives relating how Hassan got his limp. The version that he tells and the version that Fatima tells are different, but both continue to circulate and neither one is privileged over the other (Subuh, *Maryam* 191-194)

IV. Writing Rural Sexuality

The majority of the novel deals primarily with Maryam and her friends in Beirut, and she devotes a large portion of her narration to their sexual relationships with men. In Chapter six, Maryam tells the story of her family that migrated from the rural South to Beirut. As described above, she relates her family history through a series of interwoven tales that trace the sexual development of her mother, Fatima, her father, Hassan, as well as a number of her aunts and cousins.

At the beginning of the chapter, Maryam uses an agricultural image of grapes, invoking both the size and closeness of a bunch to describe her family: "I am Maryam, the final grape hanging at the tip of the bunch, the last child in my family that was nothing but a cluster of unripe grapes when they migrated from the village to Beirut, only to ripen and fall with time, scattering until each grape gave seed to another vine" (Subuh, *Maryam* 111). On the surface, this metaphor speaks to the branching and growing process of the family tree. Maryam, however, represents the last of her line since she does not have any children.

Here we also see that the stories Maryam tells of her life in the city have grown from the same vine that was planted in the rural soil of the South. The patriarchy that flourished in the village developed and took on new, but no less potent forms in the urban space of Beirut. With this in mind, it is important to note the location of this chapter, right in the heart of the novel. In style, length and size (145 pages), it is set apart from the rest of the novel, almost like a prequel that occurs halfway through the novel, again stressing its circularity. The bold type in which it is printed emphasizes that for an

understanding of Maryam and her generation's experiences, it is necessary to examine them within the context of the patterns that shaped life in the village.

Striking differences do exist between life in the city and that in the village, but these are at least initially primarily economic in nature. For example, while patriarchal patterns perpetuate the idea of Hassan as the undisputed head of Maryam's family, it is Fatima and Maryam's older sister, Zaynab, who support the family financially in Beirut after Hassan loses his job. Furthermore, the involvement of Maryam's aunt Naziha in prostitution after her move to Beirut is characteristic of her participation in an urban, rather than a rural, economy.

Despite these differences between life in the city and life in the village, Fatima and Hassan, like the other villagers, attempt to transport the village to the city by settling in a neighborhood with families from the same area and bringing with them "their furniture, clutter, traditions - their entire life." (Subuh, *Maryam* 113). Most importantly, traditional attitudes towards women, cultural values and patriarchal norms make the journey with them and set down roots in Beirut. This is highlighted by Hassan's insistence that Fatima walk behind him as they make their way to their new home after their arrival in the city "because his dignity as a man would be damaged if his cousins who arrived in al-Sayyuffy before him saw his wife walking beside him" (Subuh, *Maryam* 114). This retention of rural values prevents the new generation from ever achieving true liberation from their parents' demons despite the superficial evidence provided by Maryam of sexual promiscuity, freedom of movement and sophisticated understanding of sex in Beirut, particularly during the Civil War.

In the village, Maryam's parents' generation display an absolute ignorance of sex and come to negotiate their sexualities in ways markedly different from those experienced by Maryam and her friends. However, both the urban and rural female experiences reflect patterns of gendered oppression and exploitation.

Fatima's fear of sex develops when her mother marries another man less than six months after her father's death, abandoning Fatima and her brothers and sisters. Maryam's grandmother behaved this way because of her "obsession with sex", and "left Mother as easy prey, making sex the boogeyman that shadowed all her life" (Subuh, *Maryam* 129). Fatima's uncles, and later her husband, Hassan, encourage this attitude towards sex by forcing her to marry at the age of ten and then coercing her into consummating the marriage at the age of twelve. She has a strong will "but it was easy to tame her desires, and moreover to completely wear them away with the file of discipline," making her submissive and compliant to the men in her life (Subuh, *Maryam* 129).

From these episodes of gendered violence, Fatima learns not only to suppress her desires, but to deny her own pleasure as well. Maryam explains that "just as she [Fatima] would not acknowledge her body, she would not acknowledge her desires. Never in her life had she acknowledged the existence of any pleasure. She feared and rejected all desires and pleasures" (Subuh, *Maryam* 142). This invokes Lacan's statement that "a woman cannot speak of her pleasure," which Cixous interprets as meaning "a woman *cannot*, is unable, hasn't the power. Not to mention 'speaking': it's exactly this that she's forever deprived of. Unable to speak of pleasure = no pleasure, no desire: power, desire, speaking, pleasure, none of these is for woman" (Cixous, 2000 235). By silencing

Fatima's expression of her desires, her uncles and Hassan effectively and permanently deny those desires, her right to pleasure and any claim she has to power, accomplishing the primary goal of patriarchy of rendering women weak and dependent.[179]

Despite marrying her against her will, Hassan does not initially perpetuate the patterns of physical violence practiced on Fatima by her uncles even as he willfully denies her power to speak her desires. Fatima succeeds in evading his attempts to have sex with her, but he eventually becomes determined to reconsolidate his masculine power through the use of violence. When Fatima will not obey him, Hassan solicits advice from her uncles, who are older, more experienced patriarchs with a broader understanding of the subversive impact female disobedience can have on a system designed for masculine privilege. They urge him: "In order to discipline her, you must beat her. Make her know that you are a man. Make her fear you. If a woman does not fear a man, he cannot control her" (Subuh, *Maryam* 151).[180] While the use of domestic violence is an assertion of power, here we see that it is motivated by feelings of weakness that threaten man's patriarchal right to domination. According to Michael S. Kimmel in *The Gendered Society* (2000), "men's violence against women is the result of entitlement thwarted" (Kimmel 317). This entitlement comes from being men in a patriarchal society.[181] In

[179] In "This Sex Which Is Not One", Luce Irigaray goes a step further to argue that "she [woman] will not say what she herself wants; moreover, she does not know, or no longer knows, what she wants" (Irigaray, 262). This stems from the inescapable imperative to express herself in the dominant language of male sexual desire, which does not correspond to female desire. Irigaray speculates "that extremely ancient civilization would undoubtedly have a different alphabet, a different language…Woman's desire would not be expected to speak the same language as man's" (Irigaray 262).

[180] This kind of relationship between men, with the older patriarchs passing on pieces of advice to young men in which they suggest specific ways to consolidate their power over women, is a vital element in the perpetuation of patriarchy and so it is not surprising that this practice made the transition from the village to the city. For example, Jalal's father tells him and his brothers in front of their wives that a woman who is not obedient to her husband should be discarded like an old pair of shoes and a good woman is like an antique rug: the more you beat it, the more valuable it becomes (see Subuh, *Maryam* 289).

[181] In *After the Lovedeath: Sexual Violence and the Making of Culture* (2000), Lawrence Kramer explains that this sense of entitlement "may be abhorrent, but it is too pervasive to be explained away as abnormal.

Masculinities, R.W. Connell explains that “men gain a dividend from patriarchy in terms of honour, prestige and the right to command” (Connell, 2005 82). Therefore, Kimmel asserts, “domestic violence is most likely to occur not when the man feels most powerful, but rather when he feels relatively powerless. Violence is restorative, a means to reclaim the power that he believes is rightfully his” (Kimmel 336).

Kimmel cites family violence researcher Kersti Yllo, who “argues that men tend to use domestic violence instrumentally, for the specific purpose of striking fear and terror in their wives’ hearts, to ensure compliance, obedience, and passive acceptance of the men’s rule in the home” (qtd. in Kimmel 335). Gendered violence, then, is employed by men to solidify their position of power. In this way, Connell observes, “violence is part of a system of domination, but is at the same time a measure of its imperfection. A thoroughly legitimate hierarchy would have less need to intimidate” (Connell, 2005 84). The use of gendered violence demonstrates the inherent weakness of patriarchal systems. This does not change the fact that they continue to function as a mighty dam, holding back the flood of women’s liberation, but it does draw attention to the necessary patching that occurs to prevent the spread of the cracks that appear in its wall with the constant threat of violence as well as its frequent realization.

Indeed, Hassan’s first attempt to have intercourse with Fatima is an extremely violent, and ultimately futile, effort to confirm his masculinity and enforce Fatima’s submission. In a patriarchal society, Connell argues that inequality is maintained because men “hold and use the means of violence.” This violence is physical, but it is also psychological: “patriarchal definition of femininity (dependence, fearfulness) amount to

---

Rather it honors the norm of a cultural order in which gender polarity, precisely because it is never quite true, must compulsively reestablish itself as the truth” (Kramer 19).

a cultural disarmament that may be quite as effective as the physical kind" (Connell, 2005 83).

Constantly presenting women as weak, foolish and in need of men's supervision and protection pressures women into becoming enablers in gendered oppression as they are pushed into fulfilling the gender roles assigned to them, which they then pass on to their daughters and enforce in other women. In order to promote Fatima's adoption of this traditional gender role, her uncle tells her: "A well-behaved woman is one who knows the principles of good conduct and her duties toward her husband. She brings her shoe to him every day, asking him to hit her with it" (Subuh, *Maryam* 154). In this way, he actively and openly encourages her participation in the systems and patterns that ensure her own oppression

In order to hold her still as he attempts to penetrate her for the first time, Hassan ties Fatima to the windowsill, a technique she later practices on her brother and sisters when disciplining them, thus perpetuating this pattern of violence. After a long struggle, Hassan loses his erection and feels that he has failed this test of his masculinity and manhood.[182] Afterward, sitting on the edge of the bed and looking at the sheets,

> he stared at the sweat of their bodies on the white, crumpled sheet covering the mattress beneath them. The sign of red blood, the evidence of her virginity, did not shine on the white sheet to verify his graduation in manhood and her graduation with honors as a human being. Instead of blood, stains of sweat, which he could not see in the dark, made his hands wet as he smoothed out the sheet, tucking it beneath the mattress (Subuh, *Maryam* 153).

---

[182] Kramer observes that "man tends to be transfixed by some masculine ideal" (Kramer 2). It is the striving toward just such a masculine ideal that intensifies gendered violence against women. Kimmel outlines some of the themes that have been identified by anthropologists as leading to interpersonal, as well as intersocietal, violence, and they in various ways posit a masculine ideal characterized by virility, ferocity and sexuality (Kimmel 317).

Here we see the implicit relationship between sex and manhood. Breaking the hymen is associated with breaking the barrier to manhood. In a sense, the experience of taking a woman's virginity is, for a man, also an expression of his desire to return to the maternal, in that the rupturing of the hymen mimics the blood produced at birth, an event Hassan has no doubt witnessed numerous times in his interactions with animals.[183]

Hassan later tells Maryam that he never had a childhood: "childhood is for women and girls; your father has been a man since he was very young" (Subuh, *Maryam* 145). Childhood is associated with dependence and weakness and is a gendered state that women continue to embody in patriarchal society long after they are mothers and grandmothers. These perceived feminine traits are encouraged by men in a patriarchal society, and women are valued for having these characteristics. At the same time, however, man hates these traits as they are anathema to the qualities that he values in his own masculinity: independence and power. Thus, Kramer explains that "the woman he [man] desires (so he is told) is the bearer of a femininity that he is required to devalue. Yet her femininity (so he is told) is precisely what enables him to desire her. He can love her only insofar as there is something in her he cannot love" (Kramer 3).

Even though every man was obviously at least biologically a child for a period of time before becoming a man, the refusal to admit to this demonstrates that the characterization threatens their masculinity by placing them in the same category as women. A boy is therefore eager to become a man, accomplishing this through an act of first heterosexual intercourse that asserts his difference from and domination of woman, and Hassan's failure to effectively perform this right of passage is a kind of emasculation.

---

[183] See Irigaray 262.

Hassan copes with this threat to his manhood and masculinity by retreating to his first sexual experience: bestiality. Growing up in an agricultural society and working with animals from a young age, Hassan develops his sense of gender and negotiates his masculinity through sexual intercourse with farm animals. According to Maryam, at the time when he is trying to take Fatima's virginity, "he [Hassan] knew well that he was a true man since he had already discovered his manhood with animals" (Subuh, *Maryam* 154). By returning to the animals whose sexual organs he understands, he hopes to then be able to transfer his extensive knowledge to his wife, Fatima.

It is widely accepted that bestiality is relatively common in agricultural societies and according to biologist Midas Dekkers in *Dearest Pet* (1992), it is no coincidence that livestock are the most common choice. After all, the farm animal has been bred and "selected for its tameness and amenability" (Dekkers 58). While domesticity and docility are important prerequisites, Dekkers further argues that when human beings are sexually drawn to animals, "they are attracted by the animal's human features" (Dekkers 31). This is a natural rule of biology as demonstrated by the rare incidences of cross-species intercourse.

This quality of attraction is made evident in *Maryam of Stories* through Hassan's comparison of female animals to women, locating in particular within these animals the characteristics that are considered attractive in his social context. So, for example, "the sheep that aroused him the most was the one that submitted to him like an obedient girl, arousing him with her meekness and calm, and did not struggle when he stood behind her, as other animals did" (Subuh, *Maryam* 155-156). Here we see that Hassan is drawn to this particular sheep because he thinks it is amenable to his advances. This is not

surprising as sexual intercourse is always easier to complete when your partner is not trying to escape. What is of note, however, is that Hassan, no doubt unconsciously, praises the quality of submissiveness as a positive quality of femininity, thus mentally accepting and confirming traditional gender roles prescribed by society before he has even had any real contact with women.

It is specifically through the cow that Hassan comes to understand his wife's body, demonstrating once again that it is usually the sameness of animals to ourselves that implicates them in acts of bestiality. Dekkers pays special attention to the cow, explaining that:

> seen from the rear, female cattle have characteristics which also attract man in his wife. Men quite simply respond to women's most distinctive features, and the distinctions *par excellence* – by which one can recognize a woman at a great distance at dusk – are the broad hips, buttocks and thighs. Cows […] are well equipped in this area: cows indeed are bred for this quality in beef production. Seen from behind, with a slight sway of the hips, presenting their large vulva at an inviting height, they can easily lead a man into temptation" (Dekkers 61-63).

Hassan notes many of these similarities between the cow's body and Fatima's, coming to understand her body in this way just as "he had discovered his body by comparing it to the male bodies of his animals" (Subuh, *Maryam* 159). Maryam relates, how, for example, Hassan observes that Fatima's nipples are like the cow's nipples and "her genitalia were exactly like those of the cow" (Subuh, *Maryam* 159-160).

After a week of sleeping in the barn with the cows, Hassan learns to navigate Fatima's body as well as he can the animal's. In time, he also gains a greater understanding of Fatima's psyche, comparing her moods at different stages in her life and those of the cow: "Father recognized the similarities between the cow's moods that he knew very well and my mother's moods, which he did not know at all" (Subuh, *Maryam* 161). As Fatima develops and begins to bear children, the differences between her and

the cow become even smaller until “the young child became a woman identical to the cow, alike in body, chest, milk and life” (Subuh, *Maryam* 164). The only difference that remains is that when the bull “enters her [the cow], she produces a sound Mother never produced, a sound that mixes pain with desire and pleasure” (Subuh, *Maryam* 157). As noted above, Fatima never admits to pleasure of any kind, and continues to regard sex in particular as a dirty, violating act.

Hassan is only able to penetrate Fatima, thus achieving sexual intercourse with a woman and making the transition from childhood to adulthood, by approaching it as an act of bestiality – which, in a way, it is. Fatima is other than Hassan by nature of the fact that she is female, and therefore infinitely more foreign and exotic to him than the livestock that he has interacted with both sexually and vocationally since he was a child. Dekkers reminds us that, in the end, “every sexual encounter is a breaking of bounds, an intrusion into an alien realm, every sexual encounter retains a whiff of bestiality,” and this is true of Hassan’s initial sexual attempts and experiences with Fatima, a fact that is only emphasized by Hassan’s comparison of them to his participation in acts more traditionally understood as bestiality (Dekkers 3).

The first successful attempt at sexual intercourse with a woman is a victory for Hassan and a defeat for Fatima. She never forgives Hassan for what she perceives as the rape of a child.[184] Although a woman may eventually come to enjoy heterosexual sex, finding pleasure in it, it is always a kind of violation, and this is particularly true of a child just beginning to negotiate his or her sexuality. The act of penetration challenges woman’s otherness by attempting to co-opt her into a purely masculine language of

[184] “She [Fatima] had forgotten many things, but she never forgot that she was raped” (Subuh, *Maryam* 143).

desire. Irigaray explains that female sexuality is starkly different from male sexuality, since "woman 'touches herself' all the time, and moreover no one can forbid her to do so, for her genitals are formed of two lips in continuous contact. Thus, within herself, she is already two – but not divisible into one(s) – that caress each other." During sex, "this autoeroticism is disrupted by a violent break-in: the brutal separation of the two lips by a violating penis" (Irigaray 261-262).

In this violent act of violation, the woman or female child is forced to relinquish the self-contained existence through which she has defined her gender and sexuality up to this point and become a vessel in service to man and his penis. She begins to exist relationally. Her autoeroticism is interrupted, disconnecting her from her self and her desires in a way that will be further confirmed by social norms and coding.

The day that she loses her virginity to her husband, Fatima acts out this experience on her female doll, piercing its hymen with a needle and attempting to transfer her pain onto it.[185] After rupturing the doll's "hymen" and finding herself unable to speak her experience in other ways, Fatima tears the doll apart, demonstrating her own feelings of violation and violent dismemberment and separation from her self that occur as the result of first heterosexual intercourse. In *Psychiatric Examination of Children* (1987), James E. Simmons asserts that "qualitatively, fantasies that deal with real life problems indicate a relatively healthy use of fantasy as a coping device […] Such phenomenon are seen in children who use doll play to act out, perhaps ventilate their experiences (Simmons 83). By transferring the act of violation onto her doll, Fatima is able to regain a sense of control and cope with her experience.

[185] See Subuh, *Maryam* 150.

Hassan and Fatima live the rest of their lives in this constant struggle, with Hassan continuing to assert and confirm his dominance through violence and Fatima never forgetting the violation she suffered at his hands as a child and relying on salvation through her reward, and his punishment, in the afterlife.[186] However, the story of Um Yusuf, another woman from the village, serves as a cautionary tale that even after death, man continues to practice violence against woman.

Throughout her life, Um Yusuf loves her husband, Abu Yusuf, but he is cruel to her and squanders his affection on other women. After her death, however, Abu Yusuf misses Um Yusuf, and "this tough man fell apart […] because he no longer had anyone to boss around" (Subuh, *Maryam* 256). So he has a photographer enlarge her picture, which he hangs on the wall. While on the surface, this seems to be an act of respect in her memory, Abu Yusuf asks the photographer to alter the picture to his standards:

> Please change whatever you can. Make her puffy cheeks thin. Make her eyes bright blue and enlarge them so they are not small like a scorpion's vagina. I want to hang her picture on the wall at the memorial service held one week after her death, so everyone can see I was married to the most beautiful woman in the world (Subuh, *Maryam* 254).

Rather than accepting Um Yusuf for who she is, Abu Yusuf requests that her image be drastically retouched, thus forcing her to fulfill the standards of female beauty dictated by society. In this way he legitimates his yearning for her and perpetuates patriarchal patterns of violence after her death through this violation and control of her body.[187]

---

[186] See Subuh, *Maryam* 122.

[187] We can observe a similar process in Ibtisam's interactions with her husband, Jalal. In particular, when he comes upon her looking at old pictures one day, he flies into a rage and rips them to pieces, saying to her: "I have told you a hundred times that you have to forget your old life. Now you are my wife and must be obedient to me" (Subuh, *Maryam* 293-294). In this way, like Abu Yusuf, he demonstrates his desire for complete ownership of her body – control of its past, present and future all belong to him.

The ways in which women in the village subvert patterns of patriarchal oppression are both creative and surprising. I will use the stories of Tuffaha and Nabiha as examples. Maryam's aunt, Tuffaha, falls in love with a French soldier but this relationship is culturally forbidden so she marries a Palestinian who claims to have a good job. Upon their arrival in Palestine after the wedding, however, she discovers that he is very poor and while she knows that she must adjust to the reality of her life with all of its hardships, she can't stop fantasizing about the French soldier and the life they could have had. Shortly into their marriage, Tuffaha claims that a *jinn* sees her masturbating while she is thinking about the French soldier and "marks" her for himself.[188] This effectively prevents her husband from having sex with her, blocking his ability to confirm his manhood and reconsolidate his masculine power through intercourse and allowing her to escape the sanctioned violation of her body. Thus, discovering masturbation enables her to avoid physical sexual violation by her husband.

For ten years "things continued in this way, her husband fondling himself while the *jinn* fondled her," until Tuffaha announces one day that the *jinn* has died (Subuh, *Maryam* 190). The death of the *jinn* tellingly corresponds with the departure of the French from Lebanon, which is the cold splash of reality she needs to destroy her fantasy world and force her to permanently abandon her impossible dreams about the French soldier. In this way, we can read the *jinn* as a Ghostly Lover, an unconscious means by which Tuffaha resists and copes with the patriarchal forces that have trapped her in a marriage with a man she does not love.

This is not to imply of course that Tuffaha's relationship with the *jinn* is a conscious fabrication on her part. She and many Muslims believe in the existence of

[188] See Subuh, *Maryam* 189.

jinn, and her unconscious has most likely convinced her that her relationship with the *jinn* is external to her and therefore real. This is one of the very qualities, however, that allow us to read the *jinn* as a Ghostly Lover.

According to Esther Harding in *The Ghostly Lover* (2000), The Ghostly Lover is a projection of the Jungian animus that "appears *only* as a subjective factor in the girl's psychology" (Harding 177).[189] The Ghostly Lover is most often a complete fabrication of a woman's unconscious, but can also be the figure of an absent or deceased man whose memory the woman's unconscious latches on to, as is the case with Tuffaha, whose Ghostly Lover takes the shape of the French soldier.[190]

Despite the fact that this relationship between Tuffaha and the French soldier, represented by the *jinn*, exists only in her unconscious, it reveals "the autonomy of the animus, composed as he is of psychological contents of which the woman is unaware or over which her conscious ego exerts no control, for they belong to her unconscious" (Harding 178). The only way to escape the "'magical' influence" of the Ghostly Lover is for the woman to become aware of these elements of her unconscious. Every woman has an animus and "as he is a part of her so she is bound to him; she *must* find him and

---

[189] In *Aspects of the Feminine* (1982), Carl Gustav Jung explains that: "The anima, being of a feminine gender, is exclusively a figure that compensates the masculine consciousness. In woman the compensating figure is of a masculine character, and can therefore appropriately be termed the *animus*" (Jung 94). In other words, the masculine consciousness has a female element that is the anima and the female consciousness contains a masculine element that is the animus.

[190] The relationship between Suhaila, Maryam's sister, and her husband (see footnote 5) is another example of the problem of the Ghostly Lover, in which Suhaila has actually projected her Ghostly Lover onto her husband. Harding explains that when a woman is under the spell of her Ghostly Lover, "her animus, projected to the outside world, draws her irresistibly. Regardless of whether the man loves her or not, the fascination makes it appear as though he were the active party – as though *he* loved her. From her subjective point of view it seems to her that she is attracted from without, while in reality the thing which attracts her is from *within* – in her unconscious" (Harding 176). Failure to transfer her love from her Ghostly Lover to her husband leads to a situation where "no real relatedness can develop" (Harding 180). Suhaila's projection of her Ghostly Lover onto her husband has been a coping strategy, as we will show Tuffaha's experience to be, and when she can no longer maintain it the façade of her happiness also slips away.

consciously assimilate him if she is not to suffer the pain and distress of disintegration" (Harding 177). The departure of the French from Lebanon, and with it the realization that no real relationship between her and the French soldier will ever materialize, seems to be the push Tuffaha needs to assimilate her animus and resign herself to the traditional relationship with her husband that has been imposed on her by society and her family.

It is of note, however, that after the death of Tuffaha's husband and her return to Lebanon, she adopts God as her Ghostly (in this case Spiritual) Lover, a terminology familiar to Sufis and other mystics, thus once again beginning the cycle of escape from the real world by taking refuge in another, fantasy or spiritual world.[191] This time, she is enchanted with the perfect afterlife that this relationship will afford her.

Within the patriarchal space of the village, Nabiha also finds a way to rebel against the oppression that has defined and enchained her sexuality. Prevented by her mother from marrying, Nabiha is middle-aged, unmarried and sexually frustrated, as evidenced by the above discussion of her speech patterns. Her frustration reaches a boiling point and she finally decides to have sex with the stuttering "village idiot," Kameel.

The idiot figure is characterized by his childlike nature, innocence and irrationality. In this way, he functions as a foil to the fully realized patriarchal man, whose masculinity is exemplified by manhood, a monopoly on the use of knowledge and power and rationality. Kameel's possession of the qualities of the idiot figure is what makes him attractive to Nabiha and other women.

[191] "She wipes the drops of sweat from her upper lip and from above her eyebrows as she raises her head to heaven's sky and says, 'I beseech you, God, for no one will replace you, you, my beloved'" (Subuh, *Maryam* 211).

Nabiha acknowledges his childlike nature by referring to sex as “playing” (Subuh, *Maryam* 247-249). The fact that she views him as a child makes it easier for her to manipulate him and control the sexual encounter in a way she would not be able to do with a man fully located within the system of patriarchy. Because of her characterization of him as a child, she is surprised to discover that he has a large penis: “All this time I underestimated you. I had no idea you were so big. I always thought that you were not a man” (Subuh, *Maryam* 248). This demonstrates his masculinity and manhood, even if society insists on categorizing him as a child since he does not fit into socially accepted concepts of man.

Kameel’s innocence locates him outside of the patriarchal patterns that oppress and dominate women, and his irrationality is really a sign of his operation outside of the logic of patriarchy, which effectively situates him outside of society. Finally, because he is not fully part of society and furthermore is considered incapable of conforming to its laws, he is morally unaccountable for his actions. This is also what attracts women – Nabiha, but also at least three other women from the village – to him. They conclude that since he is an unreliable source, they cannot be punished for their actions.

By having sex with Kameel, Nabiha succeeds in subverting patriarchal patterns that dictate her behavior and attempt to control both her body and her desires. In addition to being a means of coping, the experience is also empowering for Nabiha, as evidenced by the control that she exercises over a man during the encounter. This is in spite of the fact that he is a sort of man-child from her perspective, with the body of a man and the mind of a child. She gives commands, telling Kameel to “suck on my breasts,” and “take it” (Subuh, *Maryam* 248). Clearly, Nabiha is in power during the act of intercourse,

further reversing patriarchal patterns of domination that privilege the man and consistently afford him the dominating, masculine role.

During the Civil War, Kameel finds his voice and almost stops stuttering, as people begin to rely on him to provide the healing stories that offer a new reality from the violent one presented by the war. The influx of refugees from Beirut that swells the village population is particularly in need of Kameel's storytelling. This can be understood as an unconscious yearning on the part of his audience for an existence outside of the patriarchal system that is the root of the conflict. Kameel embodies the possibility of an alternate existence. Unfortunately for Nabiha and the other women with whom he had sex, however, their stories are a part of his reality that he shares with the villagers.

As Vicki Janik explains in *Fools and Jesters in Literature, Art and History* (1998), one way to recognize the fool or the idiot figure is that "he is the one who uses language to alter perceptions, and he seems both involved in and alienated from the prevailing social structure, participating but always commenting and evaluating" (Janik 20). It seems that this is the role that Kameel grows into with the start of the war.

Even before the war, it is apparent that women are not the only victims of patriarchy – men, too, although they represent the privileged gender, suffer under the ruthlessness of its patterns and norms and desire an escape from it. The fact that men are also trapped by the very structures they have erected to dominate women is evidenced by Maryam's great grandfather's devastation at having to kill his youngest, unmarried daughter, Rawda, when she is raped and becomes pregnant at the age of fifteen. The honor killing is perceived as an act necessary to the preservation of his family's honor

and also the prevention of Rawda's further suffering, but the loss continues to affect him for the rest of his life. Significantly, he fulfills his duty by throwing Rawda, already racked with fever, into a well, thus adding her secret and story, along with his own, to those represented by the well water.

After Fatima is born to a second wife, he daily seeks redemption from her, viewing her as a kind of proxy or substitute for the daughter he loved and killed. Fatima, however, is never able to offer him the forgiveness that he craves, just as he was unable to escape the structures of patriarchy that held him in their grip.[192]

In the city, women are also able to subvert patriarchal patterns of domination and control, but in different ways. These are usually characterized as being more open than the more subtle forms of subversion practiced in the village, as evidenced above by the examples of writing and more frequent sexual intercourse outside of marriage. Another example is the story of the married couple, Abu Talal and his wife Um Talal, Maryam's neighbors in Beirut.

Abu Talal validates his manhood and sustains his power over the household by engaging in violent sexual encounters with his wife and asserts his masculinity and power over other men through his position in the police department.[193] Abu Talal's power and sense of gender are initially undermined during the Civil War as the authority of the State diminishes, which he represents as a police officer, to be replaced by less centralized forms of authority, such as the militias. He is even publicly humiliated at one point by a

---

[192] See Subuh, *Maryam* 131-134.

[193] The violence and militaristic nature that are at the root of Abu Talal's masculinity are made evident the day he takes Um Talal's virginity. She hemorrhages when he tears her hymen and he is forced to take her to the French hospital, where the doctor scolds him, asking "What, are you a donkey? Or maybe a bull?" (Subuh, *Maryam* 159). Rather than being ashamed by the doctor's comments, however, Abu Talal is empowered by what he views as a favorable comparison and feels proud of his virility. He beams in front of the other men at the hospital because "he knew his penis was a source of pride and glory when compared to other men's members" (Subuh, *Maryam* 159).

group of young fighters. Then, severely weakened by old age and diabetes, he becomes impotent and both his masculinity and his authority in the home are challenged and subverted as well.

Abu Talal's inability to get an erection provides Um Talal with an outlet through which she can challenge the patriarchal system that he represents: mockery. She frequently dresses in lingerie and spreads out on the bed, taunting his inability to assert his manhood through sex. Um Talal also beats him with a bamboo stick, reversing the patterns of violence that he practiced on her in her youth. In this way, she utilizes sex and violence, normally construed as means of masculine empowerment and methods of consolidating male sexuality, to undermine Abu Talal's masculinity and at least temporarily dismantle the patriarchal structures that hold women in check. Sex, which is demeaning and destructive to women when men are physically and socially empowered and it is practiced as an act of domination, challenges traditionally assigned gender roles when it is wielded by a woman as a weapon that exposes the vulnerability of men and patriarchy that is at the root of the patterns of violence that strive to maintain it.[194]

Um Talal further undermines Abu Talal's power, thwarting the entitlement granted him as a man in a patriarchal society and consolidated by his participation in gendered violence and the institutionalized machinery of the police department, by sharing the stories of his weakness with Maryam, Alawiyya and anyone else who is willing to listen, thus demonstrating yet another aspect of the empowering force of storytelling. Um Talal exacts her revenge by narrating his impotence and weakness in

---

[194] Impotency is a recurring theme in Alawiyya Subuh's novels. In *Dunya* (2006), Malik is completely paralyzed after being hit by a stray bullet during the celebrations at the end of the Civil War. He attempts to exercise his power again by gesturing to his wife, Dunya, to take off her clothes and sit on his flaccid penis while she bathes him. However, being forced to repeatedly acknowledge his impotency in this way actually ends up further undermining Malik's sense of power.

detail, thereby securing her own emerging social and emotional power.[195] In the end, Abu Talal can stand the reversal of oppression no longer and shoots himself in the head.[196] Without a man to dominate, Um Talal loses some of her power as she is returned to being just another woman in a patriarchal society.

Male domination of women and their corresponding coping mechanisms also develop in the city, taking on different forms than in the village. Ibtisam, for example, who marries Jalal out of a fear of loneliness and exclusion from traditional society, discovers in her new husband a jealous, brutal man, whose masculinity and authority are threatened by the life she led before becoming his wife. This feeling of weakness and helplessness causes Jalal to re-assert his power in violent and oppressive ways.

Ibtisam adjusts to this new situation by denying her past, giving up her books and the issues about which she was passionate, and altering herself down to very clothes she wears so she can convincingly play the role of Jalal Yunis's wife. The concept of traditional female roles that are violently imposed on unwilling women finds many corollaries in the village, and is in fact one of the many rural patriarchal structures that made the transition to the city. What is undeniably urban about Ibtisam's experience is

---

[195] The reversal of patterns of patriarchy occurs naturally when a man is weakened by old age or illness. Hassan, too, who oppressed and violated Fatima throughout her life, is subject to the will of Farhah, his new wife: "upon returning from his pilgrimage, sickly and fatigued, Father began fearing her, afraid she would abandon him or stop caring for him" (Subuh, *Maryam* 316).

Although Fatima does not live long enough to exploit Hassan's weakness, she succeeds in taking her revenge on her uncle for marrying her to Hassan as a child. Her uncle becomes blind and debilitated as he ages, and requires Fatima's help to urinate. Every time "she would dry his penis with an old piece of cloth that she kept next to the bed for this purpose, pulling down on it as if she wanted to take revenge on him by uprooting it from between his thighs" (Subuh, *Maryam* 149). In this way, Fatima signals her desire to castrate her uncle, stripping him of the phallus that is the root of his power.

[196] Sexual impotence is referred to again in the story of al-Negro. While Abu Talal exercises his power through the State, al-Negro gains his authority and negotiates his masculinity as a member of one of the militias during the Civil War. In the post-war era, al-Negro, like Abu Talal, is faced with political impotence when he is no longer able to exercise power through the militia, a weakness that is mirrored by physical sexual impotence. al-Negro similarly copes with this unbearable challenge to his masculinity by hanging himself (Subuh, *Maryam* 379-381).

the fact that she was able to develop and consolidate a sexual identity and her own sense of gender that was not dictated absolutely by patriarchal conceptions of femininity before marriage. Rather than being born directly into a masculine pattern of oppression that denied her desires and silenced her, she much later adopted this foreign role, rejecting, rather than modeling herself on, her formative experiences.

This process of forced assimilation and loss of self is evidenced by the habit Ibtisam develops of chewing on the inside of her mouth, "as if she were eating herself" (Subuh, *Maryam* 266). Maryam later dreams that Ibtisam completely devours herself. When Maryam finally reaches her in her dream, "[she] found that she [Ibtisam] had eaten all of herself. She had started with the soft meat of her cheeks, and then eaten her bones, eyes, hands, fingers and voice until she had completely consumed herself" (Subuh, *Maryam* 281).[197] In this way, Maryam expresses her fear that the current Ibtisam will slowly consume her former self until the Ibtisam that Maryam knew and loved ceases to exist.

The story of Maryam's friend Yasmeen signals a similar urban process of successful rebellion and liberation followed by oppression and submission. Although while she is a university student Yasmeen actively participates in the Civil War as a revolutionary, she continues to respond to the cultural and social structures that aim to control women's body. According to Maryam, "her happiness was indescribable when she graduated from college with two degrees: a BA in chemistry and a degree in

[197] The difference between the city and the village here is that in the village women are not given an opportunity to develop a sense of self in the same way, so they do not have to experience that particular traumatic loss. Maryam also imagines Ibtisam telling her: "Who would protect a woman here? Her family takes a bite of her, people take another bite, her husband a third, her children a little, religion a bite. Nothing can protect a woman here. There is no solution for woman except having civil laws that protect her" (Subuh, *Maryam* 281). While the idea of civil law that protects women exists in the city, its emergence was threatened by the violence of the war.

protecting her virginity with Honors. This was even though she had torn all the other delicate layers of flesh in her body, always careful to protect the thin hymen between her legs" (Subuh, *Maryam* 331). By juxtaposing Yasmeen's virginity with her university degree, Maryam demonstrates the equal emphasis that Yasmeen places on both accomplishments – the first as evidence of her knowledge and liberation, the second representative of her continued enslavement to patriarchal norms.[198] However, her husband, the liberal, French-educated Dr. Kamel is taken aback by her chastity and voices his disapproval, stressing the equality of men and women.

Dr. Kamel returned to Beirut determined to heal people, but he grows bitter and cynical as he discovers that he is unable to apply the skills he learned abroad.[199] His patients undermine his efforts by employing folk remedies or failing to correctly follow his directives, leading him to complain of "the microbes and germs of ignorance flourishing in the bodies and minds of his impoverished patients, those microbes and germs that defeated him and never responded to any treatment he prescribed" (Subuh, *Maryam* 343). Each patient who comes to see him has a story the telling of which they consider vital to their healing.

---

[198] We see something similar in Fatima's relationship to her daughters' educational achievements and their virginities. Each degree that Maryam and her sisters get Fatima hangs on the wall of their living room and when Maryam graduates from the university, her mother brags about her diploma "carrying it framed around the house before hanging it on the wall, looking at it with pride" (Subuh, *Maryam* 128). This mirrors her behavior with the evidence of her sisters' virginity: "after the wedding ceremony, Mother opens the salon for the well-wishers. She puts the sign of my sister's virginity on a tray, and circles the room with it so each visitor can record with her eyes this proof of the bride's virtue. With their gazes, they sign off on this degree, the red streak on the white towel proving the purity of the bride" (Subuh, *Maryam* 214). In this way, Fatima demonstrates that both the preservation of virginity and graduation from university are accomplishments of which to be proud in Lebanese society.

[199] Many Lebanese men spent time in Europe, especially in France, before and during the war, and returned with liberal ideas. However, as is shown in the case of Dr. Kamel, and also in the story of Jalal, liberal thinking was undermined by social problems and ingrained patriarchal structures upon their return to Beirut (see, for example, Subuh, *Maryam* 290).

Dr. Kamel loses patience with this process. Feeling frustrated, angry and impotent, he turns to religion: "his dream that paradise could exist on earth was broken. So he turned to dreams about paradise in heaven" (Subuh, *Maryam* 349). Dr. Kamel gives up on the possibility of change and beings to prescribe prayer to all of his patients. Yasmeen, following his lead, puts on the veil and begins wearing a headscarf, repressing her true nature which finds expression in the dancing she does with the other women at their parties.

The novel delineates the transformation of society from the prewar and bellum period, characterized by a culturally and socio-politically tolerant environment, to the postwar era in which religious discourse begins to spread rapidly, impacting various realms of daily life.[200] Gender relations are not immune to this change. Characters that label themselves liberals in the 1970s and 1980s begin to exhibit more conservative attitudes toward traditional gender roles after the war. In the past, their political beliefs were informed by leftist ideologies and feminist thought; their activities shaped by role models like Che Guevara. However, with Lebanese society's turn to religiosity, almost all of the women characters in *Maryam of Stories* resort to the institution of marriage. Here, they hope to find a place to shelter the vicissitudes of the postwar period, even if it

[200] While the shift to religiosity is apparent in Yasmeen's narrative, it surfaces as well in Maryam's description of Ibtisam's life after marriage. The posters of revolutionaries and the feminist texts that she cherished in her former life are replaced with shelves full of religious books and a picture of her husband with the head of the Shi'a religious sect. This change is superficial, however, as neither Ibtisam nor her husband ever reads any of these religious texts (see Subuh, *Maryam* 277).

For Ibtisam's husband, Jalal, part of the shift occurs in reaction to his knowledge of his new wife's former life. Every time Jalal has sex with Ibtisam, he examines her vagina to witness the devils that fly out of it. Religion is a kind of insurance policy as well against this perceived evil (see Subuh, *Maryam* 311).

means adopting traditional gender roles and accepting the concurrent increase in gendered oppression and abuse.[201]

This return to the city highlights the differences between forms of female resistance to patriarchy in the village and those in the city. These differences are echoed in the divergent ways in which the rural population of Maryam's parents' generation and the urban population of her generation negotiate their sexuality. The common thread that binds these experiences together is patriarchy. In both the city and the village, masculine power and patriarchal oppression are consolidated through male violence, just as women find subversive ways to challenge and undermine these forces. As we have shown, however, rebellion, even when it is successful, is always temporary and contingent – except when it is embodied in writing.

[201] Woman's decision to marry is reassuring to those already integrated into the dominant system of patriarchy and complicit it in its perpetuation. Thus, when Maryam accepts Amin's marriage proposal, her family feels relieved because it has transformed her from a wild card into a known quantity. By adopting an already existent role within the system she is integrated into it and no longer forms a real threat to its proper functioning. As Maryam explains, "Father, my aunt and all my siblings are happy since I am no longer a mysterious woman, free of a man's authority." (Subuh, *Maryam* 323).

Chapter Five

Conclusion

In an interview with *Assafir* Newspaper, Alawiyya Subuh explains her relationship to her characters in *Maryam of Stories* as an author: "Zuhair [the playwright] is my intellectual memory, and Maryam is my life memory. Zuhair the modern intellectual was unable to write about the war. The changes were faster than him. Zuhair is my twin. And he must disappear at the end of the novel. One of us had to disappear" (qtd. in Jaber). Subuh identifies with Zuhair and his stifling sense of the inexpressibility of the War in the writing process. This kind of memory is eclipsed, though, by the Maryam inside of her, who speaks out of necessity the experience of everyday Lebanese citizens. Furthermore, in order to make a woman writer's narrative audible, it is necessary to deflect the gaze of the male intellectual and mute his dominant narratives, or risk being the one silenced.

Maryam of Stories, like *Ya Salaam* and *The Story of Zahra*, is the story of often poor and frequently oppressed women and men - Maryam, Um Talal, Maryam's mother and father, Salaam, Luqman and Zahra, among many others. The sole intellectual characters who feature prominently in the novels – Zuhair and Alawiyya the character in *Maryam of Stories* – disappear in the case of Zuhair, or are driven mad in the case of Alawiyya. While gender, sexuality and violence, then, are presented in complex and unique ways throughout the three novels, they are predominantly bound by the subaltern

perspective of these issues that they offer. The glimpses that the reader catches of pre-war, bellum, and post-war Beirut focus on the poor and the lower-middle class, rather than the political, economic, military or social elite. These individuals were the losers of a highly developed system of clientelism, characterized by "'uneven exchange' and 'uneven distribution' between patrons and clients," that concentrated power in the hands of a few (Trabousli 238). The relative lack of power of this slice of society over the patriarchal structures that control their lives make them victims in a sense even when they participate in the perpetuation of systems of oppression.

At the same time, however, al-Shaykh, Barakat and Subuh are part of an intellectual elite that, paradoxically, hopes to produce change not through the depiction of their peers but rather through the detailed presentation of the marginalized majority. In this way, women are intricate, assigned multiple, conflicting identities and escape reduction. This continued focus, particularly in the post-war novels of Barakat and Subuh, reveals a concern for the collective rather than the individual, but a concern that simultaneously refuses to sacrifice shared for personal memories. By retroactively re-imagining the experience of the War and of women during that period in particular, these three novels provide an important contribution to the field of Lebanese Civil War narratives.

In this dissertation, I have explored representations of gender, sexuality and violence in Lebanese Civil War narratives by al-Shaykh, Barakat and Subuh. Similar studies of other novels in this genre have been undertaken, and scholarship focusing on many of the same elements of *The Story of Zahra* treated in this dissertation already exists. Consequently, I have no doubt that scholars will continue to mine these rich

narratives for meaning, discovering new aspects and re-interpreting the old in light of future realities. However, rather than attempting to directly understand the experience and representation of war, as other scholars have done, I have used these three texts as a lens through which to examine the development of Lebanese society as a whole in the progression that starts in the pre-war environment with *The Story of Zahra*, continues to the immediate aftermath of the war with *Ya Salaam* and concludes with a retrospective nurtured by considerable time with *Maryam of Stories*. In this way, I hope I have demonstrated the entrenchment of patriarchal patterns of oppression, even as I have explored the many ways in which women and men challenge the social, cultural, religious and economic structures that hold them in their grip. Through this holistic study of Lebanese society and by highlighting postwar novels and re-examining *The Story of Zahra* from a postwar perspective, my dissertation tries to fill an important gap in current scholarship.

Despite their shared thematic elements, I also examined the differences between the three novels. While all three novels dealt extensively with issues of gender, sexuality and violence, each novel revealed a more central preoccupation with one of the three, using it as a gateway to the other two topics. *The Story of Zahra* focused to a greater degree on the negotiation of gender, while *Ya Salaam* revealed a wide range of concerns primarily through its spotlight on violence. Finally, *Maryam of Stories* created a rich presentation of Lebanese society through its explicit treatment of sex and sexuality.

As I began this project, it became clear to me that no single, overarching theoretical framework was suitable for connecting these three novels, and so I highlighted instead shared themes and concerns. The focus on Lebanese society and the Civil War

localizes these novels in many ways, and to investigate this aspect I utilized Arabic criticism whenever possible in my discussion. However, an Arabic theoretical or psychoanalytic tradition that makes meaningful contributions to the work of Western psychoanalysts and gender and Feminist literary theorists simply does not exist, even while fictional writings by women explore these issues in many interesting and creative ways. In a sense, this means that literary writing in the Arab world is more developed than its theorization. At the same time, however, all three novels reveal a concern with the human, the universal, and so my use of Western theory reflects a choice much more than it does a lack. The experiences of all three authors are certainly global, even if those of their characters are not, putting them into easy conversation with similar works by women authors from around the world.

In a statement on creativity for *al-Nahar*, Najwa Barakat explains that "the Lebanese who reads me knows that I am Lebanese. The Arab reader imagines, depending on the level of destruction in his own country, that like him, I am Iraqi, Algerian or Palestinian" (N. Barakat, 2006). An Arab reader can relate to this and the other two novels when they speak to the experiences s/he has had in her or his own life. The capacity of *Ya Salaam* in particular with its focus on the universal, and *The Story of Zahra* and *Maryam of Stories* to a lesser but not insignificant extent, to communicate the experience not just of the Lebanese Civil War but of conflict and structural oppression and exploitation, more generally communicates the broader significance of these novels as well as their place within World Literature.

At the same time, these three novels are distinctly Lebanese in many ways and will also continue a conversation with Lebanese Civil War narratives yet to come, as the

war generation and increasingly the postwar generation struggle to understand this pivotal event in the nation's history and their own relationship to it and the legacy that it created. One of the issues at stake is the question of "Lebanese-ness," about which Barakat expresses her confusion. This is induced at least in part by her reluctance to explicitly identify with the imposed identities of a political party or confessional group – postwar Beirut remembers its history as one of divisive sectarianism. In contrast, al-Shaykh, Barakat and Subuh all envision a concept of "Lebanese-ness" that signifies political, social and gender equality instead of privilege and oppression, and national unity rather than discord. While the Civil War has officially ended, the struggle for Lebanon's future has just begun, and it is through a return to the past that women writers will re-imagine the structure of society for generations to come.

Bibliography

Abu al-Naja, Shirin. "Tarh Naswi li-Mafhum al-Bayt fii *Hikayat Zahra* wa *Sahib al-Bayt*." *ALIF: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 19 (1999): 170-184.

Accad, Evelyne. "Gender and Violence in Lebanese War Novels." *From Patriarchy to Empowerment: Women's Participation, Movements, and Rights in the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007. 293-310.

---. *Sexuality and War: Literary Masks of the Middle East.* New York: New York University Press, 1990.

Adams, Anne Marie. "Writing Self, Writing Nation: Imagined Geographies in the Fiction of Hanan al-Shaykh." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 20.2 (2001): 201-216.

Adnan, Etel. *Sitt Marie Rose: A Novel*. Sausalito: Post-Apollo Press, 1998.

al-Daif, Rashid. *Al-Mustabid*. Beirut: Dar al-Ab'ad, 1983.

---. *Fushah Mustahdafah bayna al-Nu'as wal-Nawm*. Beirut: Mukhtarat, 1986.

al-'Id, Yumna. "Riwayat al-Maraya (A Novel of Mirrors)." *Assafir* 21 June 2002.

---. "Lebanon." *Arab Women Writers: A Critical Reference Guide 1873-1999.* Eds. Ghazoul Ashour, Mohammed Berrada, Ferial J. Ghazoul, and Amina Rachid. Trans. Mandy McClure. New York: American Univeristy in Cairo Press, 2008. 13-59..

Allen, Roger. *The Arabic Novel: An Historical and Critical Introduction*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995.

Allen, Roger, Hilary Kilpatrick and Ed de Moor. *Love and Sexuality in Modern Arabic Fiction*. London: Saqi Books, 1995.

Allende, Isabelle. "Writing as an Act of Hope. *Paths of Resistance: The Art and Craft of the Political Novel*. Ed. William Zinsser. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989. 39-63.

al-Shaykh, Hanan. *Barid Beirut*. Cairo: Mu'assasat Dar al-Hilal, 1992.

---. *Hikayat Zahra*. Beirut: Dar al-Nahar, 1980.

---. *The Story of Zahra*. Trans. Peter Ford. New York: Anchor Books, 1995.

Anderson, Craig A. "Heat and Violence." *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 10.1 (2001): 33-38.

Arendt, Hannah. Excerpt from *On Violence*. *Violence and Its Alternatives*. Eds. Manfred B. Steger and Nancy S. Lind. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999. 3-11.

Ashour, Ghazoul, Mohammed Berrada, Ferial J. Ghazoul, and Amina Rachid. "Introduction." *Arab Women Writers: A Critical Reference Guide 1873-1999.* Eds. Ghazoul Ashour, Mohammed Berrada, Ferial J. Ghazoul, and Amina Rachid. Trans. Mandy McClure. New York: American Univeristy in Cairo Press, 2008. 1-12.

Aronson, Elliot. *Readings about the Social Animal*. New York: Worth, 2004.

Awit, Akl. "*Maryam al-Hakaya* li-Alawiyya Subuh: Malhamat al-Hayat al-Mafdudah (*Maryam of Stories* by Alawiyya Subuh: An Epic of Scattered Life)." *al-Nahar* 5 June 2002.

Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space: The Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Spaces*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1958.

Barakat, Hoda. *The Stone of Laughter*. Trans. Sophie Bennett. New York: Interlink, 1995.

---. *The Tiller of Waters*. Trans. Marilyn Booth. New York: American University in Cairo Press, 2001.

Barakat, Najwa. "Confessions romanesques (Novelistic Confessions on My Sectarian and Literary Circumstances)." *al-Nahar*. annahar.com, 21 May 2006. Web. 12 March 2010.

---. *Ya Salaam*. Beirut: Dar al-Adab, 1999.

Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." *Aspen* 5&6 (1967): sec. 3.

Booth, Alison. "Introduction: The Sense of a Few Endings". *Famous Last Words*. Ed. Alison Booth. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993. 1-32.

Bordo, Susan. *The Male Body: A New Look at Men in Public and Private*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999.

Brenner, Charles. *An Elementary Textbook of Psychoanalysis.* Garden City: Anchor Press, 1974.

Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre: A Norton Critical Edition*. New York: Norton, 2001.

Cameron, Deborah. *On Language and Sexual Politics.* New York: Routledge, 2006.

Cameron, Deborah, and Don Kulick. *Language and Sexuality*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 2003.

Chesler, Phyllis. *Women and Madness*. Garden City: Doubleday, 1972.

Chodorow, Nancy. *Femininities, Masculinities, Sexualities: Freud and Beyond*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1994.

Churchill, Charles Henry. *The Druzes and the Maronites Under the Turkish Rule from 1840 to 1860*. Boston: Elibron 2005.

Cixous, Hélène. "Castration or Decapitation." Trans. Annette Kuhn. *Psychoanalysis and Woman: A Reader*. Ed. Shelley Saguaro. New York: New York University Press, 2000. 231-244.

---. "The Laugh of the Medusa". *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism.* New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1997. 347-362.

Cleveland, William L. *A History of the Modern Middle East.* Boulder: Westview Press, 2000.

Connell, R.W. *Masculinities.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

---. *The Men and the Boys*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.

---. *Gender.* Malden: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 2002.

Connell, R.W., and Gary W. Dowsett. "'The Unclean Motion of the Generative Parts': Frameworks in Western Thought on Sexuality." In *Culture, Society and Sexuality: A Reader*. Eds. Richard Guy Parker and Peter Aggleton. Philadelphia: UCL Press, 1999. 179-196.

Connell, R.W., and James W. Messerschmidt. "+A100." *Gender and Society* 19.6 (2005): 829-859.

Cooke, Miriam. "Beirut…Theatre of the Absurd…Theatre of Dreams…: The Lebanese Civil War in the Writings of Contemporary Arab Women." *Journal of Arabic Literature* 13 (1982): 124-141.

---. *War's Other Voices: Women Writers on the Lebanese Civil War*. New York: Cambridge, 1988.

---. *Women and the War Story*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.

Damrosch, David. *What Is World Literature?* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.

Daoud, Hassan. *Binayat Mathilde*. Beirut: Dar al-Tanwir, 1983.

Darwish, Mahmoud. *Memory for Forgetfulness*. Trans. Ibrahim Muhawi. University of California Press: Berkeley, 1995.

de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. Steven Rendall. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

Dekkers, Midas. *Dearest Pet: On Bestiality*. Trans. Paul Vincent. New York: Verso, 1992.

Deleuze, Gilles. "Coldness and Cruelty." *Masochism*. New York: Zone: 1989. 9-138.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. Excerpt from *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Psychoanalysis*. *Critical Theory Since 1965*. Eds. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle. Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1986. 285-308.

Deveaux, Monique. "Feminism and Empowerment: A Critical Reading of Foucault." *Feminist Approaches to Theory and Methodology: An Interdisciplinary Reader*. Eds. Sharlene Hesse-Biber, Robin Lydenberg and Christina Gilmartin. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. 236-258.

El Khazen, Farid. *The Breakdown of the State in Lebanon: 1967-1976*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000.

el-Wardani, Mahmoud. "Alawiyya Subuh fi Shahada Jariha: Nudub al-Ruh li-Jil Talat Ahlamuhu al-Qamar (Alawiyya Subuh Gives Painful Testimony: The Soul Scars of a Generation Whose Dreams Reached the Moon)." *Akbar al-Adab* 18 May 2002.

Eysenck, H. J., and D. K. B. Nias. *Sex, Violence and the Media*. London: Billing and Sons, 1978.

Fawaz, Leila. "The City and the Mountain: Beirut's Political Radius in the Nineteenth Century as Revealed in the Crisis of 1860." *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 16.4 (1984): 489-495.

---. *An Occasion for War: Civil Conflict in Lebanon and Damascus in 1860*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.

Fayad, Mona. "Unquiet Ghosts." *Wide Sargasso Sea: A Norton Critical Edition*. Ed. Judith L. Raiskin. Norton: New York, 1999. 225-240.

Fink, Bruce. "Logical Time and the Precipitation of Subjectivity." *Reading Seminars I and II: Lacan's Return to Freud*. Eds. Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink and Maire Jaanus. Albany: SUNY, 1996. 356-386.

Firestone, Shulamith. *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*. New York: Morrow, 1970.

Flax, Jane. "The Conflict between Nurturance and Autonomy in Mother-Daughter Relationships and within Feminism." *Feminist Studies* 4.2 (1978): 171-189.

Forster, E.M. *Aspects of The Novel.* New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1927.

Foster, Thomas. "Circles of Oppression, Circles of Repression: Etel Adnan's *Sitt Marie Rose*." *PMLA* 110.1 (1995): 59-74.

Foucault, Michel. *History of Madness*. Trans. Jonathan Murphy and Jean Khalfa. New York: Routledge, 2006.

---. *The History of Sexuality*. Trans. Robert Hurley. Vol. 1. New York: Pantheon, 1978.

Freud, Sigmund. "An Autobiographical Study." *The Freud Reader*. Ed. Peter Gay. Norton: New York, 1989. 3-41.

---. "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality." *The Freud Reader*. Ed. Peter Gay. New York: Norton, 1989. 239-293.

---. *Freud On Women: A Reader*. Ed. Elisabeth Young-Bruehl. New York: Norton, 1990.

---. *General Psychological Theory: Papers on Metapsychology*. New York: Collier Books, 1963.

---. *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety*. Trans. Alix Strachey. New York: Norton, 1959.

---. *Psychoanalysis and Woman*: *A Reader*. Ed. Shelley Saguaro. New York: New York University Press, 2000.

Friedman, Susan Stanford. *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.

Frye, Joanne S. "Politics, Literary Form, and a Feminist Poetics of the Novel". *Essentials of the Theory of Fiction*, 2nd ed. Eds. Michael J. Hoffman and Patrick D. Murphy. Durham: Duke University Press, 1996. 432-452.

Gadlin, Howard. "Private Lives and Public Order: A Critical View of the History of Intimate Relations in the U.S." *The Massachusetts Review* 17.2 (1976): 304-330.

Galtung, Johan. “Cultural Violence.” *Violence and Its Alternatives*. Eds. Manfred B. Steger and Nancy S. Lind. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999. 39-53.

Ghandour, Sabah. "Hanan al-Shaykh's *Hikayat Zahra*: A Counter-Narrative and a Counter-History." *Intersections: Gender, Nation and Community in Arab Women's Novels*. Eds. Lisa Suhair Majaj, Paula W. Sunderman and Therese Saliba. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002. 231-249.

Gibran, Kahlil. “Yuhanna the Mad.” *Kahlil Gibran: The Collected Works*. New York: Knopf, 2007. 721-735.

Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale Univeristiy Press, 2000.

Girard, René. *Violence and the Sacred*. Trans. Patrick Gregory. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1979.

Grafton, David D. *The Christians of Lebanon: Political Rights in Islamic Law*. London: Tauris, 2003.

Greer, Germaine. *The Female Eunuch*. London: MacGibbon & Keey, 1970.

Hacking, Ian. *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.

Hanson, Elizabeth. “Torture and Truth in Renaissance England.” *Representations* 34 (1991): 53-84.

Harding, Esther. “The Ghostly Lover.” *Psychoanalysis and Woman: A Reader*. Ed. Shelley Saguaro. New York: New York University Press, 2000. 176-186.

Hirsch, Marianne. *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism. Bloomington:* Indiana University Press: 1989.

İlkkaracan, Pinar. "How Adultery Almost Derailed Turkey's Aspirations to Join the European Union." *Deconstructing Sexuality in the Middle East: Challenges and Discourses*. Ed. Pinar İlkkaracan. Burlington: Ashgate, 2008. 41-64.

Irigaray, Luce. "This Sex Which Is Not One." *Psychoanalysis and Woman: A Reader*. Ed. Shelley Saguaro. New York: New York University Press, 2000. 261-267.

Jaber, Inaya. "al-Ibda' Kitabat al-Dhakira (Creativity is Writing Memory)." *Assafir Newspaper*. assafir.com, 24 May 2002. Web. 12 March 2010.

Janik, Vicki. *Fools and Jesters in Literature, Art and History: A Bio-Bibliographical Sourcebook*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998.

Jarrar, Maher. "Sexuality, Fantasy and Violence in Lebanon's Postwar Novel." *Sexuality in the Arab World*. Eds. Samir Khalaf and John Gagnon. Beirut: Saqi, 2006. 278-298.

Jeffries, Sheila. "Sadomasochism." *Feminism and Sexuality: A Reader*. Eds. Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996. 238-244.

Johnson, Barbara. "Writing." *The Princeton Sourcebook in Comparative Literature: From the European Enlightenment to the Global Present*. Eds. David Damrosch, Natalie Melas and Mbongiseni Buthelezi. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009. 227-238.

Jung, Carl Gustav. *Aspects of the Feminine*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982

Katz, Sheila Hannah. "*Adam* and *Adama, 'Ird* and *Ard*: En-gendering Political Conflict and Identity in Early Jewish and Palestinian Nationalisms." *Gendering the Middle East*. Ed. Deniz Kandiyoti. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996. 85-106.

Kermode, Frank. *The Sense of An Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Khalfa, Jean. Introduction. *The History of Sexuality*. By Michel Foucault. Trans. Robert Hurley. Vol. 1. 1961. New York: Pantheon, 1978. xiii-xxvi.

Khoury, Elias. *Al-Jabal Al-Saghir*. Beirut: Dar al-Adab, 1977.

Kimmel, Michael S. *The Gendered Society,* 3rd ed. Stonybrook: SUNY, 2000.

Kramer, Lawrence. *After the Lovedeath: Sexual Violence and the Making of Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.

Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits: A Selection*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Norton, 1977.

---. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Vol. XI. New York: Norton, 1981.

Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space.* Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. Oxford: Blackwell, 1998.

Longxi, Zhang. *Unexpected Affinities: Reading across Cultures*. Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2007.

Majaj, Lisa Suhair. "Voice, Representation, and Resistance: Etel Adnan's *Sitt Marie Rose*." *Intersections: Gender, Nation, and Community in Arab Women's Novels*. Eds. Lisa Suhair Majaj, Paula W. Sunderman, and Therese Saliba. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002. 200-230.

Makdisi, Ussama. "After 1860: Debating Religion, Reform, and Nationalism in the Ottoman Empire." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34.4 (2002): 601-617.

---. *Artillery of Heaven: American Missionaries and the Failed Conversion of the Middle East*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008.

Malti-Douglas, Fedwa *Woman's Body, Woman's Word: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991.

Martin, Wallace. *Recent Theories of Narrative*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986.

Mehta, Brinda. *Rituals of Memory in Contemporary Arab Women's Writing*. Syracuse University Press: Syracuse, 2007.

Mernissi, Fatima. "Virginity and Patriarchy." *Women and Islam.* Ed. Azizah al-Hibri. Oxford: Pergamon Press,1982. 183-191.

Millett, Kate. *Sexual Politics.* New York: Doubleday, 1970.

Mitchell, Juliet. *Psychoanalysis and Feminism: Freud, Reich, Laing and Women*. New York: Vintage Books, 1974.

Moosa, Matti. *The Maronites in History*. New Jersey: Gorgias, 2005.

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. 833-44.

Paglia, Camille. "Sex and Violence, or Nature and Art." *Psychoanalysis and Woman: A Reader*. Ed. Shelley Saguaro. New York: New York University Press, 2000. 298-308.

Petty, Richard E., and Duane T. Wegener. "Attitude Change: Multiple Roles for Persuasion Variables." *The Handbook of Social Psychology.* Eds. Daniel T. Gilbert, Susan T. Fiske and Gardner Lindzey. Vol. II. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1998. 323-390.

Polanyi, Livia. *Telling the American Story: A Structural and Cultural Analysis of Conversational Storytelling*. Norwood: Ablex Publishers, 1985.

Potts, Annie. *The Science/Fiction of Sex: Feminist Deconstruction and the Vocabularies of Heterosex*. New York: Routledge, 2002.

Qur'an. Trans. 'Abdullah Yusuf Ali. Beltsville: Amana, 2004.

Rhys, Jean. *Wide Sargasso Sea: A Norton Critical Edition*. New York: Norton, 1999.

Said, Edward. *The World, The Text, and the Critic*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983.

Salem, Elise. *Constructing Lebanon: A Century of Literary Narratives*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2003.

Salibi, Kamal. *A House of Many Mansions: The History of Lebanon Reconsidered*. New York: Tauris, 2005.

Samman, Ghada. *Beirut '75*. Trans. Nancy N. Roberts. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1995.

---. *Kawabis Beirut*. Beirut: Dar al-Adab, 1976.

---. *Laylat al-Milyar*. Beirut: Dar al-Adab, 1986.

Schweickart, Patrocinio P. "Reading Ourselves: Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading." *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*. New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1997. 609-634.

Shaaban, Bouthaina. *Voices Revealed: Arab Women Novelists, 1898-2000*. Boulder: Lynne Rienne, 2009. 169-171

Shanahan, Rodger. *The Shi'a of Lebanon: Clans, Parties and Clerics*. New York: Tauris, 2005.

Shapiro, David. *Autonomy and Rigid Character.* New York: Basik Books, 1981.

Shaw, Stanford J., and Ezel K. Shaw. *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey*. Vol. 2. Cambridge: The University of Cambridge Press, 1977.

Sidawi, Rafif Rida. *al-Nadhra al-Riwa'iyah ila al-Harb al-Lubnaniyah*. Beirut: Dar al-Farabi, 2003.

Simmons, James E. *Psychiatric Examination of Children*, 4th ed. Philadelphia: Lea & Febiger, 1987.

Sorenson, David S. *Global Security Watch: Lebanon*. Santa Barbara: ABC, 2010.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "*Wide Sargasso Sea* and a Critique of Imperialism." *Wide Sargasso Sea: A Norton Critical Edition*. Ed. Judith L. Raiskin. Norton: New York, 1999. 240-247.

Stallybrass, Peter, and Allon White. *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986

Subuh, Alawiyya. *Dunya*. Beirut: Dar al-Adab, 2006.

---. *Maryam al-Hakaya*. Beirut: Dar al-Adab, 2002.

Thorpe, Michael. "'The Other Side': *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Jane Eyre*." *Wide Sargasso Sea: A Norton Critical Edition*. Ed. Judith L. Raiskin. Norton: New York, 1999. 173-181.

Traboulsi, Fawwaz. *A History of Modern Lebanon*. Ann Arbor: Pluto, 2007.

Waldby, Catherine. "Destruction: Boundary Erotics and Refigurations of the Heterosexual Male Body." *Sexy Bodies: The Strange Carnalities of Feminism*. Eds. Elizabeth A. Grosz and Elspeth Probyn. New York: Routledge, 1995. 266-277.

Wazen, Abdo. "Hikayat al-Hikayat (The Story of Stories)." *al-Hayat* 23 May 2002.

West, Candace, and Sarah Fenstermaker. "Doing Difference." *Gender & Society* 9 (1995): 8-37.

“Who Put the Navel in Navel Oranges?” *NPR.org*. 18 April 2009. Web. 12 March 2010.

Winslow, Charles. *Lebanon: War and Politics in a Fragmented Society*. London: Routledge, 1996.

Zaraqit, Abdel Majid. *Fi Bina’ al-Riwayah al-Lubnaniyah*. Beirut: al-Jami'ah al-Lubnaniyah, 1999.

Zeidan, Joseph T. *Arab Women Novelists: The Formative Years and Beyond*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995.

Zurayk, Constantine. *Ma‘na al-Nakba*. Beirut: Dar al-'Ulum li-al-Malayin, 1948.